

VIEW to the U transcribed
Season 1, Episode #10
Professor Rebecca Wittmann (Historical Studies)

[VTTU Theme music]

Rebecca Wittmann (RW): The population didn't vote for the Nazis because of their anti-Semitic platform, because of their racist platform. They accepted their anti-Semitic platform. They swallowed it whole, along with the platform, which said 'we promise to make Germany glorious again.' Glory. We promise to restore law and order to our unlawful streets. We promise to bring jobs back. These things are identical. I don't think by any stretch of the imagination should we say that we're in the same historical moment. That we're in a society that looks the same, but you can see the ways that you can appeal to people's anxiety about their own situation, such that they will ignore the perils of others.

[Theme music]

Carla DeMarco (CD): Engaging with the Past with Professor Rebecca Wittmann from the Department of Historical Studies at U of T Mississauga. On this edition of View to the U Podcast, Rebecca speaks broadly about her research on the Holocaust and its enduring effect on Germany and subsequent generations.

We also cover a range of topics in relation to her work including Rebecca's very personal connection to this area of research, how Germany has confronted its past and what lessons are to be drawn from it in light of some of the current political tension around the world. She also talks about her observations on the changing and enhanced academic environment at UTM.

Hello and welcome to View to the U: An Eye on UTM Research. I'm Carla DeMarco at U of T Mississauga. View to the U is a monthly podcast that will feature UTM faculty members from a range of disciplines, who will illuminate some of the inner workings of the science labs and enlighten the social sciences and humanities hubs at UTM.

[Theme music fades out]

CD: Rebecca Wittmann is an associate professor of history at the University of Toronto and currently the chair of the department of Historical Studies at UTM. Her research focuses on the Holocaust and post-war Germany, trials of Nazi perpetrators and terrorists, and German legal history. She has received fellowships and funding from several agencies, including the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation, the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum and the DAAD, German Academic Exchange Service.

Her first book *Beyond Justice: The Auschwitz Trial* was published in 2005 and won the Frankel Prize in Contemporary History. She is currently working on her second book about Nazism, terrorism and the significant political, social and cultural shifts that have taken place in Germany since the Holocaust.

CD: I'm just wondering if you can provide a broad overview of your work, and perhaps some specific projects that you've worked on over the course of your academic career?

RW: The work really did start as being legal history and the legal confrontation with the past. So, I teach about the Holocaust, but my research is on how Germany deals with the Holocaust and with mass atrocity. Initially I did that purely looking at it through the law. Focused on a trial that took place in the

'60s in Germany and wrote my first book about that. I'm really interested in not the way the international community responds, and has responded to Nazi crimes, but in how Germany itself responded, West Germany and now unified Germany. That has shifted along the way.

For my second project, I was initially going to look at more trials. In different states, in different decades in Germany. I started realizing that the law wasn't really the place where the past was being confronted and dealt with. Because if you look at Nazi trials in Germany, and there were many, many, many of them. They were failures, terrible failures. With dismal results, with the vast majority of defendants going free. If you think of it out of something like 6,000 investigations, 3,000 were put to trial, and 124 got life sentences.

On top of that, the law really focused on, in the German criminal code, which is how people were being tried, on the sadistic, excessive acts of people who went above and beyond the duty, which had this problem of legitimizing Nazi standards of criminality. How does one reconcile this terrible, legal record in my opinion, with what is in fact and extraordinarily positive, successful, social, political, cultural record of confronting the past? Like no other country, really. I don't think you could state that there are too many other countries that build a memorial to their own mass-murderous impulses in the center of their capital, the size of two football fields, next to the most important historical statue, the Brandenburg Gate.

I started to think 'why is that'? And wanted to trace all of the messy, confused, conflicting social, cultural, political changes that have led Germany to a place where over a million refugees are brought in on *purely* humanitarian grounds, which is also singular: there are really no countries who do that. Of course, not all successfully in Germany, for sure, but still a model. What I'm doing now instead is reframing my discussion of Germany's confrontation with its past, through kind of generational markers of moments of shift and change. The whole question that I'm interested in is how post-atrocity generations, and now we're, you know, on the third generation, have come to terms with the past, for which the perpetrators never took responsibility. That perpetrator generation is sort of my grandparents' generation.

This also has brought a very personal element into my research, which I'm still trying to figure out how to incorporate in a scholarly academic setting, but I feel like I can't negate it. I'm looking at it through this larger question, which was raised by a wonderful, German scholar named Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht. He's part of the next generation, so my father's generation. He talks about, what he considered to be a kind of free floating guilt in the immediate post-war period, that there was this sense of a horrific crime having been enacted and nobody taking responsibility for it. People moving on in their positions as doctors, lawyers, professors, civil servants, politicians, whatever. People who had murderous or horrific pasts, and not responding to their children's questions of, 'What did you do? What did you know? How guilty were you?' A certain group of that next generation, and that includes my father, and this is where the personal comes in, couldn't live with that silence.

So they, not all, and one really shouldn't say all, because there were of course many who would protect and defend their parents' silence. Sometimes those parents were just mothers, because so many fathers had died in the war. And in my situation, it was also just my father question his mother, but he wasn't satisfied with her answers, that she didn't know anything, she wasn't political, your father died on the Russian front as a soldier, which is true, but, and he wasn't satisfied when he went to university and noted that all of his professors of history didn't teach past 1933, so they didn't teach about the Nazi period in the 1950s in German universities, and that lawyers, and that doctors, and that they all had some affiliation with the past.

And so he along with many others, including Gumbrecht, who has written about it, what he, Gumbrecht, describes as sort of, grabbed this free-floating guilt and took it down, and started finger pointing. In a way that needed to be done, I think. And asking difficult questions. You see this in the 1960s in all sorts of forms, student revolutions in Germany, which happened everywhere. You can look in the United States, and look at the response to the Vietnam War in the '60s. It's a questioning of authority, it's a questioning of war, it's a questioning of traditional politics. But in Germany it had this flavour also of questioning of their parents Nazi past. They would not accept the silence anymore as an answer.

You see it also in the form of filmmakers. One of the most famous filmmakers of that era, Fassbinder, questioning the past, Volker Schlöndorff, all sorts of others. You see it also in the rise of a kind of left-wing terrorism in Germany, through the Baader-Meinhof gang, who is a very radicalized version of the 1960s students, who felt that all of the construct and structures of society had this lingering Nazi element to them, and they did.

CD: And is it general knowledge though, if you're living in Germany, do you know who has participated? Who were the Nazis?

RW: No. Of course there are some famous figures, but no. Especially from the next generation. If you were part of that generation, you might know if someone was a member of the SS. Which meant that they were part of the ideological wing of the Nazi party, but also often SS officers worked in death camps and concentration camps. But in the end, after the end of 1945, there were 8,000,000 party members left. You know, what do you do with them? They mostly go back. And this is also not a particularly German phenomenon.

CD: I'm also wondering though too, why is it that so many people did not get charged?

RW: Because there was very little will on any side. On the allied side, you have to imagine post-war Germany is very, very quickly the frontline for the cold war, so where the allies – the Americans, the British, the French and the Soviets – had conquered Germany together. The Soviets had done most of the military winning, and had really pushed the Germans out much sooner than the western allies had from the West. The Soviets immediately occupied East Germany. Where you had international military tribunal in 1945-1946, it very quickly became clear to the western allies, that the Soviets had fantasies of taking over all of Germany, and turning all of Eastern Europe and then Germany into a communist block.

So very quickly, the Americans had to turn Germans, who had been, of course their most horrific, hated enemy, into their ally, against the Soviets. So the policy, after some trials – American military trials, American and international military tribunals – the policy thereafter was clemency, clemency, amnesty, amnesty, deNazify, deNazify. For the Germans, they had very little interest in looking back in punishing themselves, in beating their breasts in horror about what they had done. They were living in a pile of rubble and wanted to move forward and rebuild, and work and work and work, and forget.

Even amongst survivors, *of course* they wanted justice, but a lot of them didn't really want to think about it anymore. In some ways, that's kind of a natural phenomenon. You look at other, post-dictatorial societies, or post-atrocity societies that transition into democracy. You have some trials, but mostly you have amnesty, and you have the refilling of posts by the same people. Especially bureaucrats and civil servants. On top of this then, German trials were very shoddily organized, in my opinion, legally, such that the focus became on the excessive perpetrators and not on the ordinary man and woman. So, no, the idea was to move forward instead of shamefully looking back.

But for the next generation, for the post-war, left wing, educated university generation that is not good enough. And it's through *them*, that change starts to occur. And that's really something that I grew up listening to, because it was my father, a child when the war ended, was disgusted with post-war West Germany, and he didn't stay and fight the fight, he left, and went first to America and then to Canada, but it was always part of my strongest memories, was going back to Germany, every summer, visiting his family, and him bringing 10 or 15 books about the Holocaust and putting them in front of his mother and saying, "Read this, this is what was done in your name, and don't tell me you didn't know. To tell me you're apolitical is a political position." Very harsh, very moralistic. Something I see quite differently now, but that's because I have the luxury to be able to do so.

So, I'm really now interested in these moments in time where shifts and changes occur. I would say that student revolution moment is one of them. Some of the trials are moments. You have a period in the, sort of, late '70s and '80s, where there's more of an onslaught of television shows about it. You have the building of reunified Germany that needs to figure out who it is now, in a *completely* different context. Where East Germany had always seen itself as the first fighter against fascism and the first victim of fascism. Suddenly, the wall comes down and they all have to have a shared history, which has been politically totally different.

You have the building of the Berlin memorial, which starts in the 1990s and is completed in 2005. Then you have another trial, which I'm very interested in, which happens in 2009-10, of John Demjanjuk, who was extradited to Germany and tried by the Germans, after having been tried by the Israelis and falsely convicted as a terrible, horrific guard at Treblinka [extermination camp], and sentenced to death in the 1980s. He spent nine years on death row in Israel, before it was discovered when the iron curtain came down and KGB files opened, that he wasn't Ivan the Terrible from Treblinka, but Ivan the less terrible from Sobibór [death camp]. So he goes back to the United States, and the Germans find a way to extradite him and try him there. What does that say, sort of this whole full circle of trials from the '60s to the 2000s?

So these are the ways that I'm now trying to explore German guilt and shame and confrontation with the past, all through this lens of the past not having been confronted by the actual people who perpetrated the crime. It also has become much more important to me to see it through the lens of the society, and of the eyes of my children, for example, who, when we last went there and I did research on this, we were there in 2014 during the World Cup, and suddenly all of these symbols of nationalism had a *completely* different feeling: a healthy, wonderful, lively, joyous feeling of celebrating a really great soccer team. It's very interesting. My father, his blood curdles at the sights of German flags and German nationalism everywhere. Nothing good can come out of German patriotism and German nationalism.

CD: Well, weren't all those films made by that, was it Leni Riefenstahl?

RW: Yes.

CD: That was all about the propaganda and the ...

RW: Triumph of the Will, yes.

CD: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

RW: But then in 2014, when Germany wins the world cup, it's everywhere, and it's jubilant, and Germans can feel proud to be German again. Maybe that's not such a bad thing, but of course with

checks and balances that need to be there. So, I'm very interested in this evolution, and this change, and what it means. For example, from my friends in Germany, many of whom are academics and scholars, who have terrible Nazi grandparents in their past. And whose children are celebrating being German. It's complicated and it's unfinished, and so this is the book I'm trying to write.

CD: You're also making me think of this, it's really off course, but do you see then parallels with Canada with not confronting its past with the aboriginal people? I mean, I don't know that you can compare the Holocaust with the residential school as an example, *but* I can't help but think, growing up in Canada, we didn't talk about a lot of this stuff.

RW: I find myself more and more gobsmacked when I think of how little I learned about our past. And, no, of course, you can't compare in the sense of trying to say one is like the other. In Holocaust studies, we deal with these questions all the time – comparison. And there are many scholars who *bristle* at the idea of any kind of comparison. I think we can get past that very easily and say every genocide is unique. We don't compare in order to belittle. But if those who conduct the Truth and Reconciliation Commissions, and who know much more about the history of our Indigenous people than I do, call it a cultural genocide, we had better listen. And I can't tell you how often, for example, in graduate courses now, when I teach courses, I ask students to write about memory and atrocity, and some of them write about memory of residential schools and the literature that exists or doesn't exist around that.

And it is to me, in some ways, there is the arrogance of the new world. You could see this in the United States as well, and the unwillingness to confront the horrors of the destruction of the native population there. Or the horrors of slavery. We somehow have this feeling that we are in an inclusive, diverse society, who's doing everything right, where in Germany they were exclusive and xenophobic and destructive. It's the arrogance of distance and it's a total fabrication to imagine that we aren't living on stolen land. So I talk to students about these kinds of parallels all the time. I absolutely think about it, and I think to focus on one shouldn't mean to belittle the other. When I'm thinking about the lessons to be learned from the past, I don't want that to be in a bubble and to say, "Well, because the Holocaust was unique, we can't learn anything from it, because nothing is ever going to be the same and nothing was." It's completely, and totally wrong.

CD: On that note, you are sort of leading into the other question I wanted to ask you about, because you know, we spoke such a long time ago, but that conversation has stayed with me and I was looking at my notes, thinking, when did I profile you before, it was in 2006.

RW: Yeah.

CD: I remember, when you said that the Nazi party came along, and very charismatic leader, and they were making these promises that they were going to improve people's lives and make things better, so the people were sort of swayed by this. I just think based on your expertise in this area of history, and being aware of the current political climate in the US and elsewhere, and you see horrible things happening with the white supremacist rallies, and violence. But there's that familiar rhetoric of 'making things great again.' From your viewpoint, how do we educate the next generation, and also maybe mobilize to improve things.

RW: So, on the one hand I'm very pessimistic, and on the other hand I'm very optimistic. I feel very pessimistic about our ability to get through to some of those 'alt right,' or right-wing extremists, who have embraced hatred. You could try and do so on an individual basis, certainly, but unfortunately what's required is education. And, for a certain bunch, education is not in the cards.

On the other hand I feel very optimistic in the sense that I don't worry so much about there being a holocaust in the United States. Or a destruction of a whole community of people in the United States. And I also feel optimistic about the fact that there are many, *many* people who resist in the United States, in Canada and everywhere. But I do think it is *very* important that we *heed* and pay attention to the signs of, what I call, the slippery slope into indifference, apathy, anxiety, fear.

Never has this been more obvious to me than when I was teaching the Holocaust course last January. I was in week two, I think, when this proposed Muslim ban was made. There was a great deal of anxiety amongst our UTM students, many of whom have understanding of, experience of persecution, racial, religious, ethnic, being refugees, being pushed to the outskirts. And, not only that, but faculty members – and I'm Chair of a department now – who suddenly found themselves unable to travel to the United States. And I was teaching about the rise of Nazism, teaching about the slippery slope. In my lecture notes, which I've tweaked over the years, talk about the appeal of Nazism, and the fact that the population didn't vote for the Nazis because of their anti-Semitic platform. Because of their racist platform. They accepted their anti-Semitic platform. They swallowed it whole, along with the platform which said, and it's now seared into my mind, because I've taught it so often, but because the relevancies were there, which said, "We promise to make Germany glorious again." Glory. "We promise to restore law and order to our unlawful streets. We promise to bring jobs back." These things are identical.

I don't think, by any stretch of the imagination, should we say that we're in the same historical moment, that we're in a society that looks the same, but you can see the ways that you can appeal to people's anxiety about their own situation, such that they will ignore the perils of others. And so, for example, when I think of the many, *many* people that I know and care about, in rural United States, where we spend a lot of time as a family, who have lost their jobs. Where coal industry have disappeared, where crystal meth and fentanyl is creeping in. It's not so much that they are rabid racists, who really are angered by what's happening to black populations in big cities. No, they don't care about those things. They care about putting food on their tables, getting jobs for their kids, feeling better about themselves, and if they're told that they're going to get all those things, they will swallow everything else.

In fact, I think if you could put some of those people that I know, together with people who are living in big cities in the United States, who are facing a whole host of other issues, including racism, you would find that they have more in common than they realize, but they're being divided rather than brought together. And, it's a cynical, political tool in order to gain votes, and it works. We have to be wary of it, and open about it, but let me tell you, as a professor, as an educator, and as someone who thinks about these things all the time, I still don't find it easy to talk to some of those people who I know, who voted that way, and say, "Look what you're enabling." Because they're too preoccupied with their own concerns.

Still, I don't think one shouldn't try. I do think you only have to look at universities today, and students today who are educating themselves, to see that there is resistance, and there has to be resistance, and to hope, that when I'm teaching a class of 150 students, they hear me.

CD: No, and I think that's an important point to make though, because you're talking about being in an academic environment, because I think that it's true. I have conversations around here and people are outraged that some of the things that we hear going on. But I think also it's a place where people like to debate and talk about things, but it's maybe for the average person who just wants, as you say, to put some food on the table, they want healthcare and things like that, that they're coming at it from a different angle.

RW: They are, and they also have really, very lopsided, distorted understandings of what's happening. For example, only one news source, which might be Facebook and all of their Facebook friends. Or they might not even have ever turned on a news source that's not deeply aligned with their political ideologies, and so, they really only hear one message that is continually reinforced. It's not an easy thing to get in there and to shake up people's understanding of their world, especially when they're being spoken to in a way that makes them think that change is going to come. However, these people who really bought the message, they're not stupid. If nothing happens, that improves their situation, they're not going to believe it for long. I do think that really exposing truths is what has to become most important to us, and for them to recognize that they're not getting anything that they were promised.

Reverting back to what I study and what I look at, nobody got anything that they were promised, except mass devastation in the end. It was really at that moment, after 1945, where in some ways you had hour zero, where everything was different, everything was devastated, but you still at the same time had continuities of personnel, of people and so on. People recognize that they could not anymore subscribe to something that was not going to do anything but be destructive. Then you really have to find ways to make sure that checks and balances are put into place. I struggle because I don't have the answers to our current political climate, and I feel like in some ways we have the comfort and the convenience of distance in Canada that we can look at, south of the border and say, "Thank god that's not happening here."

There are many for whom these questions of racial divides and sense of prosecution are not dissimilar in Canada. They're not being dealt with properly, and they're not being addressed properly. We have to be listening.

CD: What do you think is the biggest impact of your work?

RW: I feel like that the work that I'm doing resonates for a lot of people. Whenever I talk about what it means to confront the past, and to think about the past and to not forget about it, but also to not use empty slogans about never again, and history will repeat itself, but to really, truly confront the, sort of, intersection between the personal and the historical. There's always a great deal of interest, precisely because of Germany's example, I think. We've just had an election in Germany, which had some relatively terrifying results to be honest. It is clear that the politics of the leader, of the Chancellor Angela Merkel are still the most popular. Thank god for that, because her politics have been one of *true* inclusion, and of truly opening the doors to the wretched masses, and that is a *direct* response to a horrific genocidal past. Make no mistake. That is her, by the way, she's East German, so it's very interesting to think of the way she's processing this past.

That is her putting to practice the slogan of "never again." Because countries do not do this. They don't take in a million refugees when they're already a huge, swollen population. Canada, we love to talk about our gorgeous record: 25,000 in a population of 35,000,000? Germany has taken in over a million in a population of 80,000,000, and a landmass that fits into Ontario I don't know how many times. It's a totally different story. How did Germany get there? Of course there's *massive* disruptions, and there's *massive* resistance to it, in the form of a far-right party, that's now gaining power.

I still don't worry that Germany is going to go the way it did before, but I think that these, sort of, *seismic* moments of change and of anxiety and positivity at the same time, are in many ways a direct response to the past. It needs to be understood in that context of what's happening in Germany today,

and the model that's being set up. However contested it is, I still, frankly, think that ultimately it's going to be to Germany's benefit to have been so inclusive.

CD: What I hear you saying though, is that your work, there's a lot of people that it resonates with.

RW: Oh yes, there are all sorts of ways that my students here too, my post-war Germany classes are always full. It's not full of Germans and Jews, it's full of students from everywhere who are *very* intrigued by this concept of a country shifting into a successful democracy, over a long period of time, after being divided also for 40 years. They are very interested into why and how that can happen.

[Interlude music]

CD: Coming up, UTM at 15. With almost a decade and a half spent on the UTM campus, having started here in 2003, Rebecca reflects on the flourishing of the department of historical studies, and the ways in which her department is connecting with the community and each other.

CD: This is going into another direction, but the first season of the podcast is UTM at 50. I'm asking what kind of changes they've seen at UTM since they've been here. Also, if there's anything that you, especially, because you're chair, changes that you see on the horizon?

RW: It's so funny, I was just talking about this. I can't describe the changes. When I came in 2003, we weren't a department. I was a historian who was doing undergraduate teaching at Erindale campus, and my affiliation was downtown. As Chair, I mean, I could go on and on and on about this, but I've seen this turn from a campus of 5,000, satellite-commuter campus, to frankly the place that I want to feel is my home. It's a sea change, and it's a very positive one. There are older faculty, who are much more resistant to this change, but the hirings that have been done under my Chairship and that will continue, is a whole new generation of faculty who feel *very, very* connected to this campus, to these students, to the facilities here.

The facilities here too, the beauty of the campus, the way that the buildings are integrated with the landscape, with each other. The way that departments can speak to each other. It's unrecognizable from then. I have felt in the past that there was this way in which faculty sort of, almost the way that Canada has this chip on its shoulder in relation to the United States, had that in relation to the downtown campus. I feel like by-and-large most of us have completely thrown that off, discarded it, and feel much more connected to and attached to this campus. Our student body is so amazing. Our department with its multidisciplinary, and becoming interdisciplinary connection to the campus, to the students, to each other is changing, and I think that in many ways, the way that UTM is moving is really something to be proud of.

To be a completely integrated into the University of Toronto system, but to have its very distinct flavor that we can really embrace.

CD: Yeah, and as you mentioned though too, about the expansion of Historical Studies, it does make me think of, there seems to be such a diversity of research going on now, that has just sort of exploded.

RW: It has absolutely exploded, and when I look at the way that Historical Studies, the way that faculty is doing research both in their own disciplines, but also more and more their ways in which we're speaking to each other, and to the students, it's very exciting to see. I don't see it slowing down, really.

CD: Yeah, and you get to move into a new building in 2018.

RW: Yes, that's going to be so awesome.

CD: I pass by every once in a while, I take these walks, and it's like I can't believe how huge that building is.

RW: It's going to be so awesome.

CD: Yeah.

RW: And it's going to, again, solidify and enhance the sense of community amongst faculty and students. I think it's a wonderful place to be. I have completely, organically that side of me that wanted to be connected more to downtown has fallen away.

CD: Yeah.

RW: I mean, I love having my downtown connection and my downtown colleagues, and I've graduate students there too, but you know, I also have a new graduate student who is connected very much to Mississauga, and to the campus, and to the community. That has taken on a whole new flavour for my undergraduate students to feel her connection to this place and her presence. For me also, to see what has drawn her to being interested in post-war, east Germany, as someone who's rooted here. It's very cool, and that's only going to continue.

CD: It's amazing. Those are all the questions I have for you today.

RW: Great.

CD: Thank you so much for coming in.

RW: My pleasure, what fun.

CD: Thank you.

[Wrap-up music]

CD: I would like to thank everyone for listening to today's show. I would like to thank my guest Rebecca Wittmann for coming in to speak about her great work in the Department of Historical Studies.

Thank you to the office of the Vice-Principal, Research for their support, for everyone who has been helping to promote this podcast, and for all the great feedback I've received.

Thank you to Tim Lane, for his tunes and support.

And just a request: if you have a moment, please rate the podcast on iTunes, which helps others to find this podcast. But also, if there are things you would like to see featured in upcoming shows, I welcome the feedback.

Thank you.