

An Uncommon Friendship

reviewed by [Kathleen L. Housley](#) in the [July 4, 2001](#) issue

As Bernat Rosner and Frederic C. Tubach become acquainted, they learn something about each other that challenges their growing friendship. Rosner lost his entire family in the Holocaust; Tubach is the son of a Nazi counterintelligence officer. They refuse to accept a safe and superficial relationship that is silent about the past. Instead, they decide to risk together the excruciating pain of remembering and in the process assess their successful careers in America: Rosner as a corporate lawyer who worked hard to make himself an insider, and Tubach as a professor of German who had felt so smothered and deceived by Nazism that he took on the role of outsider.

Tubach is the book's narrator because Rosner cannot bring himself to write down his past. As Rosner explains, "Each survivor has a different way of coping with the past. My way has been to pretend that all the horror of the past happened to someone else." While Rosner's story forms the major part of the book, Tubach's story provides an insightful counterpoint. When Rosner recalls the rampant anti-Semitism that was an accepted part of village life in Hungary, Tubach remembers that one of his first German reading primers was full of anti-Semitic stories.

As Tubach struggles to understand Rosner's past, he reexamines his own and makes some startling discoveries. For example, when he was 11 years old he developed tuberculosis and was sent to a sanatorium. Recalling a Nazi doctor scrutinizing his medical records, he is suddenly chilled by the realization that the Nazis had formulated a plan to exterminate people with the disease. The seemingly benign doctor was deciding if Rosner should die.

The first time that Frederic and Sally Tubach are invited to dinner by Bernie and Susan Rosner, Frederic is deeply uneasy, realizing that the dinner could be "attended by uninvited guests," including his uncle, an SS officer who was hanged at the end of the war, or Rosner's parents, emerging from the ashes of the crematorium. But the evening goes well, and the couples become good friends. Then in 1989 the Rosners invite the Tubachs to travel with them to Tab, Hungary,

where Rosner grew up and from which he and his family were deported to Auschwitz. Near the end of the visit, Rosner points out some run-down brick buildings, saying, "That's the brickyard. That's where the horrors began," but he refuses to say any more.

Four years later, Rosner visits the Holocaust Museum in Washington, D.C., and looks up the records of arrivals at Mauthausen concentration camp, to which he had been transferred from Auschwitz, and finds his name listed. At that moment, as he later tells Tubach, "all the steps he had taken in his life seemed to lead nowhere but back to the horror of that past." The time has come to tell his story, and he chooses Tubach as his chronicler because he feels they share a common European cultural heritage, replete with a utopian longing for a civil society.

Tubach agrees because he "simply refused to accept the fact that the deadly barbed wire erected by Adolf Hitler and his henchmen half a century ago would forever mark us off from one another in a fundamental way, that Hitler would have the last word in how we could relate to each other."

At the end of the book, Tubach struggles to assuage his unease with the persistence of anti-Semitism, but troubling incidents which recur during his and Rosner's travels in Europe undercut his attempts to be reassured. When Rosner and his wife first revisit Tab in the early 1980s, he is assaulted by a villager's anti-Semitic curses. Suddenly he is once again the terrified 12-year-old crammed into a train heading to Auschwitz. During the Rosners' and Tubachs' later visit, a neo-Nazi stands up and shouts "Heil Hitler" in a restaurant they have just entered. In light of these incidents, Tubach's affirmation of the necessity for civil behavior and the universal idea of a common humanity comes across almost as pleading.