

Want to Understand the Rise in White Supremacy? Ask a Former Nazi

by Jacqueline Carroll

Growing up in a Jewish household, I frequently heard the term “Never Again” bandied about in the context of the Shoah. My father taught me to stand up and fight. My mother taught me to always have my passport, jewelry, and a sewing kit ready in case we had to flee in the middle of the night, as her family did during the Pogroms. I was too young to recall the Nazi resurgence in the late 1970s but heard a lot about it from my father. The Nazis seemed to be lurking in the shadows and fringes for decades.

That changed around 2016. In the past six years, white supremacists have infiltrated the mainstream world via social media and even politics. People started making antisemitic and racist comments openly. I, myself, was the recipient of antisemitic comments made shortly before the pandemic that ended up sending my life on a completely different trajectory from litigator to human rights advocate for the Simon Wiesenthal Center.

This year, 2022, feels different, more ominous. Nazi-style propaganda has been thrown on lawns all across the nation, but especially on Chicago’s North Shore. Swastikas have popped up at our local schools, and our temples have received bomb threats. A string of hate crimes was perpetrated against the Orthodox Jewish community on Devon Avenue, two blocks from where I grew up. And then Highland Park.

While the motivation for that horrible massacre appears to not be antisemitic in nature, my Jewish friends were shot at a few blocks from my mother’s home by a man who frequented white supremacist websites. I wanted to truly understand the rise in antisemitism and white supremacy so I did what any reasonable Jewish woman would do . . . I asked a former Nazi.

When you conjure up an image of a Nazi, Acacia Dietz is not what comes to mind. Acacia is a 5’4”, pink haired, whip smart, spunky consultant for the Simon Wiesenthal Center, who happens to be the former head propagandist for the National Socialist Movement (NSM), the largest neo-Nazi organization in America. As the daughter of a preacher, Acacia grew up in a conservative Christian family in rural Ohio and was always involved with the church. She did not grow up with racism or antisemitism. That said, she had only interacted with one Jewish person and a few African Americans during her childhood.

I asked Acacia what compelled her to join the NSM and she told me it was not just one incident, but a combination of many. Acacia stated that in late 2017/early 2018, she felt completely broken inside. She lived in a neighborhood that was predominantly Black and witnessed her autistic son come home nearly every day having been bullied or beaten by the other kids. Her social media bubble primarily consisted of other conservatives, and as the political division grew in the United States, she found herself feeling targeted and dehumanized by the extreme left for her beliefs.

And then there is the guy. A few years after getting away from her abusive ex-husband, who tried to kill her, Acacia found herself in another abusive relationship. Even with restraining orders, she simply did not feel safe. It was at this time she was introduced to the NSM.

The NSM had gone through a makeover, courtesy of its then leader Jeff Schoep. Instead of a swastika, their symbol was an Odal Rune. Instead of proclaiming itself as a neo-Nazi organization, the NSM’s new creed was that it was a “White Civil Rights organization.” Acacia did not fully realize she was being indoctrinated into a neo-Nazi organization until she was in deep. By then, she felt protected enough to leave her boyfriend. Acacia stated: “Who is going to mess with you when you are around a bunch of Nazis?” She does have a point.

While Charlottesville was the event that shook me to my core and made me worried that “Never Again” could be around the corner, Charlottesville had the opposite impact on Acacia. When President Trump, whom Acacia supported, said there were “good people on both sides,” she not only agreed but wanted to get more involved. Acacia stated: “The far left says you should not hate but love everyone but, if you have extreme conservative views, then you are a Nazi and you should

die.” Acacia said her decision to join the NSM was “a reaction to their dehumanization” but now realizes “my reaction was to dehumanize.”

A Netflix documentary called “The Social Dilemma” was a real eye-opener for me. It highlighted an internal Facebook report from 2018 which showed that “64% of the people who joined extremist groups on Facebook did so because the algorithms steered them there.” I asked Acacia if she found that to be the case for her. She informed me that in late summer 2018, the NSM had already been forced off social media and their head propagandist quit. There was a hole to fill and, since Acacia had experience with websites and social media, she stepped in to fill it.

When Acacia became the head propagandist, she created a new website for the NSM and was able to get them back on social media. Acacia understood the web and marketing and figured out how to work the system to NSM’s benefit. She asked herself: “How do you get content out there without it getting flagged? You change the cover of the book. Inside, the book is still the same.” She gave me an example of posting an advertisement on Facebook for a podcast about World War II. The post neglected to mention that the podcast would be pro-Hitler. Acacia understood that some people would turn the podcast off once they figured it out, but some people would have their interest piqued enough to stay.

She called it “leaving breadcrumbs,” and likened it to evangelizing where the goal was to cast a wide net to spread the word to as many people as possible.

Acacia says that many of the individuals who initially encountered the NSM and other similar groups were not racist or white supremacists but came because the far-right had mastered the art of political marketing. The NSM publicly espoused values appealing to a large segment of conservative-leaning citizens and would use content and video to stir emotions to entice the viewer to become “educated” and learn more. This education included the idea that it is whites versus non-whites and promoted an “us versus them” mentality. By showing videos or images of a Black person harming a white person, they would spark a visceral, primal instinct: the “survival of marginalized whites.”

Due to her professional experience, Acacia became a member of the board of directors soon after joining the NSM. She informed me that she never agreed with the more extreme views in the movement but learned how to compartmentalize. Acacia quickly became desensitized to the violence as she would use graphic videos, video games, and memes to recruit. That is, until Christchurch.

While she did not watch the livestream of the massacre, she ended up viewing the video and learned about the killer’s manifesto. Acacia said it looked as though the killer was playing a live shooter video game, but he killed 51 real people in two mosques because of the “Great Replacement” and “white genocide” theories –the same ideology she promoted in her role as propagandist. The guilt overwhelmed her, and she turned to Jeff Schoep to get out as he had left a couple of months prior. Acacia left the NSM in the summer of 2019.

I asked Acacia if I was going mad or if something had changed this past year to ramp up antisemitism. Acacia assured me I am not going crazy. Whew. She informed me that white supremacists have learned a new way to beat the algorithms and stay online from an unlikely source...ISIS. Yes, that ISIS. Since social media giants have become better at flagging content and forcing sites offline, white supremacist and terrorist organizations overload the algorithms to the point that they cannot possibly ban all of the content out there. “So if one account is banned, make three more. If they ban those three, make six more and just shift to new ones.”

White supremacist groups have also revamped their old school tactics by meeting offline and creating “white advocacy days.” Part of this includes distributing horribly antisemitic fliers. For those who have not seen them first hand, count yourself lucky. Plastic zip lock bags filled with either rice or pebbles and pieces of paper have been thrown on lawns across nearly every northern Chicago suburb since March of this year. The content sometimes changes but the idea is the same: “Every part of the COVID/Biden/media agenda is Jewish.” This goes back to the conspiracy theory that Jews are puppet masters controlling the world and responsible for keeping everyone else down.

Some of the fliers include photos and names of politicians, doctors, and other important people they claim are Jewish, Zionists, or communists. Some of the fliers also claim that Jews “hijacked our country” and are committing “genocide against us.”

The fliers serve as both recruitment and intimidation. Most of the fliers distributed on the North Shore suggest visiting a website that is a “white supremacist version of YouTube.” Acacia said that, if someone decides to click on the site, they “end up being sent down a rabbit hole and indoctrinating themselves.” However, distributing these fliers in Jewish neighborhoods is less about recruitment and more about intimidation. The goal is to “let Jews know there are Nazis in your area” and “you cannot do anything to me because what I am doing is 100% legal.” The fliers even comically state “THIS IS NOT INTIMIDATION” knowing full well that it is.

Acacia told me that when leaving the NSM, she was able to let go of the racism but giving up antisemitism was harder. When something bad happened, a part of her thought “it had to be the Jews.” That changed when she met my colleague, Alison Pure-Slovin, and a few other Jewish people. She told me that she was invited into Jewish people’s homes and to their tables and was shown a kindness that smashed her preconceived image of a Jew. Acacia has now found a way to use her media skills for good.

As a consultant for the Simon Wiesenthal Center, she monitors the dark web and works with our law enforcement contacts when dangerous situations arise. Acacia and Jeff also created a non-profit organization called Beyond Barriers which works to counter extremism and de-radicalize white supremacists. Acacia and I come from vastly different backgrounds and ideologies, but now work together towards the same goal. Who would have thought it?

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