Mallory Noe-Payne : The Last Ride, a deep dive into a shocking, unsolved mystery.

Male 1: These two young men disappear off the face of the Earth, and the last person to see them live was this sheriff's deputy. His stories were so unbelievable.

Mallory Noe-Payne: Listen to The Last Ride podcast. Part of the NPR network.

Michael Paul Williams: In his book, The Souls of Black Folk, W.E.B. Du Bois wrote of the twoness of being both Black and American. Two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings, two warring ideas in one dark body, kept only from being torn apart through its own strength. Those warring sides were produced by centuries of subjugation and discrimination, all part of America's original sin, enslavement, a crime against humanity older than the nation itself. But America neither invented nor owns a patent on crimes against humanity. Under Adolf Hitler, Nazi Germany murdered six million European Jews during the Holocaust. What constitutes home and identity can be complicated and even more so for those connected to atrocity by bloodlines. What does it mean to be a person who is both German and Jewish? And to complicate things further, what does it mean if that person grew up in America, raised by family members who fled their homeland? Mallory Noe-Payne spoke to a young woman who embodied those warring ideals. American, Jewish, German. Their conversations raised questions for me about the meaning of home, identity, reconciliation, and reparations. If your ancestral land was a house of horrors, could you go home again? I'm Michael Paul Williams and this is Memory Wars, a podcast exploring how society confronts sin. [Music]

Mallory Noe-Payne: OK. So where do we start? Where does the story start?

Haley: That's something that I've been wondering also, because this is a story that I really want to tell.

Mallory Noe-Payne: One place this story could start is on a night more than 80 years ago in a small German town. On this night, a 12-year-old girl sat by a long, skinny window, overlooking the street in front of her house. In many ways, the young girl was privileged. Her family was well-respected, owners of a heating pad factory. They had a maid and a cook and lived in a large stone house. The little girl had a silver charm bracelet she loved to wear, a harmonica she loved to play, and a bike she loved to ride.

Haley: And she had all these really colorful aunts and uncles, like Tantavali [assumed spelling] and Uncle Fritz [assumed spelling] and Uncle Otto [assumed spelling], and how they spoiled her, and they do fun things behind her, very proper mother's back.

Mallory Noe-Payne: Her proper mother was from a proudly German family who traced their lineage in the small town of Ulm a thousand years. The men were

decorated veterans, the women graduates of international boarding schools. But like any family, they had multiple identities. They were German, and they were also Jews. And in this young girl's world, Nazis were rising to power. Anti-Semitism was becoming more open and the little girl was no longer allowed to play with her group of friends or join the youth club.

Haley: She had a teacher who would like pull her in front of the class and humiliate her and blame her for strange things. A classmate like lost his chocolate Easter bunny and the teacher said, oh, well, you know, a Jew obviously took it.

Mallory Noe-Payne: Things got really uncomfortable really quickly. Jewish shops were boycotted. Jews were banned from parks and pools and from owning typewriters, cars, and even bicycles.

Haley: She remembers her bicycle being taken away and how heartbreaking that was for her. You know, because to her, that was like her joy and her freedom.

Mallory Noe-Payne: The night this story begins is infamous today.

Haley: So during Kristallnacht.

Mallory Noe-Payne: But at the time, the girl's family didn't know what was coming. There was a knock on the door. The girl's father answered.

Haley: It was a freezing cold night and he only opened the door because he was expecting a delivery of some sort and he was wearing his slippers and his housecoat. Like, she remembers very vividly.

Mallory Noe-Payne: She remembers sitting in the window, watching as the men who came to the door dragged her father away down the street. They took him to the town center. to a stone square plaza outside City Hall, a central community place, a fountain in the middle. They lined up all the Jewish men.

Haley: And they beat all the men, very, you know, bloody and senseless, and dragged the rabbi around by his beard and shipped them all off to Dachau.

Mallory Noe-Payne: And the girl was left behind. The course of her life irrevocably shifted. Her mother managed to get her daughter passage on something known today as the Kindertransport, a smuggled shipload of Jewish kids sent to England.

Haley: She just remembers how unbelievably miserable and scared and hungry and, you know, sick she was.

Mallory Noe-Payne: And over the next eight years, the 12-year-old girl grew into a 20-year-old young woman. Living in England, separated from her family,

she had no idea where they were or what happened to them. Then one day, she got a postcard from the Red Cross saying her family was alive through an improbable maze of events. Her parents and brother, they had survived. They all reunited in the United States.

Haley: Yeah, she doesn't talk about the day, about seeing them again, but there are photos from that day of her just sort of standing in between her parents. And there's like this space between them, but they're both looking at her and just, like, I always wonder what it would be like to, like, see your child when she's 12 and then all of a sudden she's 20 and you don't know what -- you know, you -- yeah, you don't really talk about everything that's happened.

Mallory Noe-Payne: It's a story of deep loss. A young girl in a window who watches her world stolen away. First her bike, then her father, then her home. But there's another place we could begin this story. Two generations later, with the woman telling it to us. A woman who's chosen to return to Germany, to try to reclaim those stolen things, to reclaim an identity, a family, a homeland. [Music] I first met Haley when I was speaking to a graduate class in Munich. And out of respect for her family, we're not going to use her last name. Haley was fascinated by my project, by the idea of exploring how Germans have reckoned with the Holocaust, because in some ways it was the same issue that brought her to Munich as well. So we got together and got to talking, and she told me about that little girl in the window, her grandmother.

Haley: My Omi had a really thick German accent. She was very smart. She was very vain. She was a really complicated person, but she was always very warm.

Mallory Noe-Payne: Haley can picture her grandmother in that window so well because she's seen it in person. When Haley was about 10, her Oma took her there. They knocked on the door of this old house and went upstairs together. Her grandma stood there, telling the story of watching her father get taken away.

Haley: I think that's one of the moments that really made me want to understand. And I wanted access to -- do you know what I mean? I wanted to -- you know, I'd heard some versions of what had happened but I needed to know more. What causes a person to go that still and that quiet? Yeah.

Mallory Noe-Payne: So began Haley's fascination with her family's story. Haley was born in the United States, but because of her parents' work, she grew up in France and the UK and all over. One thing that was consistent was her Oma. She'd bring them little German ladybug chocolates, sing them German nursery rhymes, give them traditional German clothing. And as Haley got older, she gravitated towards that German heritage.

Haley: And I'd always sort of like toyed with the idea of learning German and --

Mallory Noe-Payne: She began to pull apart the complicated feelings

surrounding her family's history. She felt this duty to remember.

Haley: I've written a couple of little essays about sort of experiences growing up with my mother and her experiences with her mother.

Mallory Noe-Payne: When Haley was in her mid-20s, her Oma died. And over the years, those childhood tales of her grandmother morphed into a full-on adult obsession.

Haley: I couldn't shake it. Like I can't shake it. Sometimes I'm like, why am I obsessed with this? It feels really self-indulgent. And this sort of like very emotional need to process all of this.

Mallory Noe-Payne: And then in 2019, there was this family trip, where she and her parents and sister, they all went to Germany together.

Haley: And it was summertime and there were roses blooming everywhere.

Mallory Noe-Payne: Her family was touring the countryside, doing research, and visiting old ancestral homes through Bavaria, Baden-Wurttemberg, and the Rhineland.

Haley: You know, we were hiking through grapevines and cherries hanging off the trees. And I was just sort of like, why don't I live here? If I'm so happy here and I feel so fulfilled in like doing this digging and I'm so excited about going into archives and... Being allowed to look through photographs and page through documents and put that story together, why don't I do that?

Mallory Noe-Payne: And so she did. Just a couple of months after that trip, in 2019, Haley moved to Munich and began a master's degree in history. On the side, she continued to do research on her own family. [Music] Why would someone return to a place of unspeakable trauma? What does it take for them to feel welcomed? Haley was just as interested in these questions as I was. And so she agreed to let me walk alongside her as she continued down the winding road of her family's story. One foggy, damp fall weekend, we got in the car and headed west from Munich. OK. Are you OK in the backseat?

Haley: Totally.

Mallory Noe-Payne: Yeah. We were headed to Ulm, the town where her grandmother spent the first years of her life and where her family traces its ancestry. The small city sits on the Danube River. Its old town is speckled with crooked half-timber houses. And its landmark is the Ulmer Munster, gothic church with a towering steeple. "Ulm is the place", Haley says, "that's become a site of pilgrimage for her family." So what are we standing in front of?

Haley: We're standing in front of the house that my Oma was born in and lives in with her family until she was 12.

Mallory Noe-Payne: I had heard Haley describe this building before. It was a bit surreal to stand in front of it, five stories high, large stone, windows facing towards a busy street. It was all just so normal.

Haley: It's always funny to me how much of just like a city apartment house it feels like, you know what I mean?

Mallory Noe-Payne: We watch someone drop trash off in the alley, someone else sitting and working at a plant-covered desk in one of the front windows.

Haley: I think now it's all apartments, part of it could be offices.

Mallory Noe-Payne: It's a building, Haley says, she wouldn't otherwise look twice at, except she grew up with the stories of what happened here. Stories of a normal happy childhood of the [inaudible 00:13:27] over the doorway. How her Oma always wanted to cut her long pigtails. How she thought her mother treated her brother better because he was a boy. >> Like I listened to them reverently. Honestly it was sort of like, it's like the way you listen to fairy tales as a kid almost except it's like you're -- it belongs to you in a way. Like all of her stories felt like really carried emotional weight. I mean, I dreamed about it all the time. You know, I had recurring dreams about the things that she told me about and, I mean, some of them were nightmares. A lot of them were nightmares. Haley would dream of hiding, running away, being hunted down, distorted images of her Oma stories combined with the Holocaust stories she heard at her synagogue as a child. And although she's reluctant to claim that trauma, grief, and fear as her own, it's undeniable that it was a huge part of her upbringing. But being physically in Germany, standing in front of places like this house and walking around Ulm, it allows Haley to tap into another part of her family's story, to fill in the gaps of what came before the fear and the terror.

Haley: I mean, it's sort of like a, it's like physical evidence, right? It's like almost like a proof of rootedness or something or proof that this was a life that existed.

Mallory Noe-Payne: Since she first visited this house as a young girl with her grandmother and mother, Haley has continued this family practice. When, through their research, they discover a building where family used to live, they'll go see it in person. If they're feeling bold, they'll even knock on the door and ask to come in. Haley has done it multiple times, in different places across Germany. I was fascinated by this practice. Is it nerve-wracking?

Haley: Yeah. I mean, you have to be so careful about it, right? Because people's initial reaction is always like, oh, but, you know, I bought this house, I have the deeds I can show you. And, you know, it's like, I promise I'm not trying to take it from you, I'm not trying to claim it in any way. way. I just really want to see it. I'm not trying to assume anything about where, you know, why you

occupy it. [Music]

Mallory Noe-Payne: OK. Sure. Haley isn't asking for a deed to be handed over, but I think she is still making a claim. Emotionally, if not physically, she's asking to be let inside. I kept thinking about what it would be like to be the person on the other side. Would I open the door? Would I invite Haley in? [Music]

Ingo Bergmann: We met the last time.

Haley: Yeah.

Mallory Noe-Payne: While we were in Ulm, Haley wanted me to meet Ingo Bergmann, a local historian who became a family friend. He's not Jewish, but Bergmann is employed by the city and currently works on a museum about Ulm's Jewish history. Future exhibits are scrawled on post-it notes stuck to the white plaster walls.

Ingo Bergmann: This is it, [inaudible 00:17:12].

Mallory Noe-Payne: Gosh, it's beautiful though. Haley says the most important aspect of his work is tracing family trees, reconnecting descendants strewn around the world in the wake of Nazi persecution. Haley has met family. She didn't know she had thanks in part to that work.

Ingo Bergmann: [inaudible 00:17:32] and this is really more than a pleasure if you can give people their history back and this is special, yes.

Mallory Noe-Payne: Haley has spent a lot of time with Bergmann, but still had lingering questions she never asked him. One of the things she was curious about was this photo she has of her great grandmother, her Oma's mother, with Ulm city officials. Bergmann explained that it was taken during something called a reunion. In the 1980s, four decades after the end of the war, the city and its administration actually issued invitations, formally welcoming the town's former Jewish residents back. It was the first of several efforts of reconciliation. And other German towns did the same thing, but Ulm was among the first and most persistent. Bergmann says the events started small, but the city repeated the effort every few years and eventually they grew, especially after the reunification of East and West Germany.

Ingo Bergmann: And they really grew, especially in the 90s, there were really big gatherings where all the people came and they had the chance to meet and find former friends and family and these were really great. and the last --

Mallory Noe-Payne: Haley's great-grandmother had been at one of those reunions. The photo Haley has is of her signing the so-called Golden Book of the City. Bergmann says this was practice to mark important events. And he doesn't know what Haley's great-grandmother wrote, but he has read some of

the other entries.

Ingo Bergmann: A lot of them say that they're grateful that this city has invited them and this is still their home city. And this is what I realized that a lot of the people, they lived all their life here. And it was really difficult to be kicked out, to be kicked out of the society, to look down on.

Mallory Noe-Payne: Before the war, more than 500 Jews lived in Ulm. That population was decimated by the Holocaust. But of those who survived, some did return. During the 1991 reunion, more than 100 people signed the Golden Book. After all of the humiliation, lost property, death of loved ones, the reunion was a space to make amends.

Ingo Bergmann: And to have this, that afterwards, people are telling them, no, this was wrong and you're really invited here and we want to say sorry, but also be friends. That helped, I think, a lot of people for themselves.

Mallory Noe-Payne: Bergmann acknowledges there are plenty of others who didn't come to the reunions, who rightfully never wanted to step foot in Germany again. But he's hopeful, as each generation passes, that these acts of reconciliation will become easier. [Music] The final stop in our visit to Ulm is the Jewish section of the town cemetery. Haley's mother has tasked her with seeing if there's space on the family stone for her Oma's name. This doesn't say Juden but it says --

Haley: Israelisha.

Mallory Noe-Payne: Israelisha.

Haley: Perfect.

Mallory Noe-Payne: Yeah.

Haley: So I guess we go, nice.

Mallory Noe-Payne: Yeah. As we walk further in, the trees get larger, everything becomes a bit more overgrown. We take the time to clear off an old headstone as we search for Haley's great-grandparents. Even though it's not as well-tended as other parts of the cemetery, there are still signs of visitors. Candles here, pebbles there, resting on top of gravestones. A Jewish tradition.

Haley: It always makes me happy when I'm somewhere foreign and I see like a memorial or a Jewish gravestone or something and there are stones on it because it means other Jewish people have been there and it's important to them.

Mallory Noe-Payne: So can I leave one or is that?

Haley: Yeah.

Mallory Noe-Payne: Yeah. OK [Music] We find the grave Haley came here for, her great-grandparents. The two people buried in front of us here were Haley's Oma's parents, the parents of that little girl in the window, the father who was dragged to Dachau, the mother who was forced to put her daughter on a ship to England. They survived and resettled in America. And yet here they are buried in the Jewish cemetery, in the German town that chased them away. Why do you think they chose to be buried here?

Haley: Because it was home? Yeah. Because, I mean, I can't describe how it feels to look around and see like so many names that I know here. And it's strange to me that it makes me emotional. But this is like a community in a way, you know, like they're not like lost here. Like, I think the reason my mom wants to put her mom's name on the grave is like so she's not alone and she's not lost. Like, I still feel like in a strange way, surrounded by family being here. I think my grandmother would really like to have her name here. Like, I think if she could choose, you know, this was still home to her. [Music] Why would someone return to a place of such trauma? For Haley, it's to feel connected to something beyond the trauma, to stand in the graveyard of her ancestors, spend weekends hiking in the mountains her grandmother once did, celebrate birthdays with cousins she didn't know she had. All of this is possible because Haley has a German passport. Part of reparations is that victims of persecution by the Nazi regime and their descendants are eligible to reclaim citizenship. It's how Haley has been able to live, work, and study in Munich. One day, Haley and I visited a museum in Munich on Nazi history. She overheard a tour guide tell visitors that Munich's Jews were driven out and never came back. Haley was shaken and a little angry. She wanted to march back in and introduce herself. She wanted to say, I am here. I'm back. [Music] Do you think that other -- in the two years that you've been here, have you felt welcomed as German by others? Interesting question. My German friends are like, yeah, yeah, you're German. OK. Sure, you know. Sure, you have your passport but, you know, you're not a real German. And I'm like, yeah, OK. Honestly, it doesn't offend me. I actually agree with it. And that's OK. You know, I wanted to receive that citizenship as more of a way of reclaiming that heritage and as a as a way to be able to get here and spend time here more so than needing to feel accepted.

Mallory Noe-Payne: How is it to be Jewish in German society in your two years' experience here?

Haley: It's something I both avoid talking to and bring up more often than I ever have in the past Because people will ask me, oh, you know, why do you have your German citizenship and I say my mom's German and If I know them well enough maybe, you know -- or once we've had more than a few conversations, I'm more comfortable.

Mallory Noe-Payne: So generally you just say my family lived here before the war.

Haley: Yeah. And most of the time it stops there kind of intentionally on my part. It feels like divulging the information that my family is German and Jewish is emotionally loaded and I don't want someone to like feel like they've been burdened with that information and have to treat me with sensitivity and ask questions and like I want being German and Jewish to be normal. [Music]

Mallory Noe-Payne: After our trip to Ulm, Haley was ready to take another step in her journey to learn more about her family history. She wanted to learn about her Oma's grandmother, a woman named Gisela [assumed spelling], who Haley knew had lived in Munich. All she knew about her is how she died from falling down the stairs. But she wanted to know about Gisela's life, not her death, where her family had lived, what they did for work, who they married, how their lives progressed, and were changed as the world around them changed. [Music] Together we visited the city archives of Munich, in search of evidence about Gisela's life. Yes. Historian Ava Tyrell [assumed spelling] is employed by the city to research Jewish history. Her job includes helping folks like Haley explore their own family stories. [Music]

Haley: May I see the [inaudible 00:28:53].

Mallory Noe-Payne: Which one?

Haley: -- the census card. Through marriage certificates, registration documents, and even Nazi-issued identification cards, Tyrell revealed facts about Haley's ancestors that she had never known, sparkling gems of information. A great-great-uncle who was a professor, another who joined a fraternity and had a dueling scar. A great-great-aunt who married a shopkeeper. And more information about Gisela's death. A story that had before only lived in family memory.

Ava Tyrell: Our database says that she committed suicide. I read jumping or falling from a window so there could maybe also be an accident. I don't know.

Mallory Noe-Payne: The family story Haley had grown up with was that Gisela had died falling down the stairs. Nazis had officially gained power the year before. Random attacks on Jews and Jewish property had already begun. Although the most racist and stringent anti-Semitic laws hadn't been passed yet. Still, Tyrell says Gisela's death in 1934 classifies her as a victim of Nazi Germany.

Haley: But I thought it was interesting that she's still listed as a victim of national socialism even though it's a suicide. So I thought that was like almost generous in a way. Do you know what I mean?

Ava Tyrell: Of course, I mean, we don't know about the background. How would

you say? That's a kind of generalization. We made for the database to include everyone Jewish who died in Munich during that time.

Mallory Noe-Payne: What Tyrell explains to us is that any Jew who died while Nazis were in power is considered a victim, whether they died in Auschwitz or by suicide. Even if someone died in 1935 of an ulcer, for example, we don't know, well, how come this person was so seriously ill? Maybe the circumstances just also had a part in that. Haley wanted to come to the archives to learn about her family's life before the Nazis and she did. But that history feels really inescapable. I'm struck by the longevity of it all. Haley's Oma was a Holocaust survivor. But two more generations back and her great-great-grandmother is also a victim. And here's Haley, six generations later, still having nightmares. [Music] Have you ever felt unsafe being Jewish in Germany?

Haley: I've felt unsafe being Jewish my whole life. And that was something that my parents taught me to feel. And they told me, never wear a Jewish star in public. Don't talk about your religion.

Mallory Noe-Payne: Since living in Germany, Haley says she's actually found she talks about her Jewish identity more than she used to. She's found a small Jewish community here that's helped embolden her. When we were in Ulm, she wore a Jewish star necklace the whole time. Haley says, as a Jew in Germany, she kind of feels like she's on an endangered species list. In March 2021, someone painted a swastika on a post box in her neighborhood. She was furious, scared, and sad. She reported the incident to a government agency that responds specifically to anti-Semitic crimes. The swastika was cleaned and a report filed.

Haley: I almost feel safer knowing that there is sort of a special -- you know, there's an eye out for Jewish people here. I don't feel that it's entirely fair because that's not something that is afforded to all minorities who all deserve to be protected and recognized and prioritized. But, yeah, in a really bizarre way, I feel safer here than I have ever felt anywhere.

Mallory Noe-Payne: Haley's one person. She does not speak for an entire community. One German Jew told me he was raised to not wear his kippah, that frameless hat, in public. And anti-Semitic crimes are increasing. But Haley appreciates being here. She feels like she belongs. And she's found a community. She participates in this government-funded outreach program. They go into schools and community groups to answer people's questions about Jewish identity. She's met a lot of people who are curious and also want to talk about their family history.

Haley: And people who want to talk about, like, you know, maybe they have, you know, a Polish grandfather who was persecuted, or maybe their family was kicked out of another country and sent back to Germany after the war and they

have their own traumatic history. And I love that sometimes that conversation allows me into their lives. And I really appreciate that openness and vulnerability and I mean everyone has their stuff, right? And if people are willing to be open, I think it's really beautiful. [Music] Beautiful, uncomfortable, loaded. Those are all words Haley used to describe the conversations she's had since moving to Germany. She takes responsibility for having these conversations and ultimately, she's grateful for those who share the burden with her you. [Music]

Michael Paul Williams: So Mallory I'm listening to this and I'm thinking that Haley sounds like someone who has an insatiable desire to return to the scene of a crime that was committed against her loved ones, her ancestors, and I mean, what are we to make of that?

Mallory Noe-Payne: Gosh, what do we make of it? I think that the pull of family, the pull of rootedness, of connection, is stronger than the terror, than the trauma.

Michael Paul Williams: So you don't want to be defined by that trauma. You don't want trauma to become all-consuming.

Mallory Noe-Payne: Yeah. Yeah. That despite those challenges, it's still worth doing to pursue that healing.

Michael Paul Williams: Yeah. I would say that often the tug of our ancestors is more powerful than our revulsion at past trauma. I think about my experience with America and how America has not always loved me. You can make the argument that America does not love me now. And I guess this entire discussion raises the question of what constitutes home? Is home where our ancestors are or were and where we have memories, be they pleasant or the ultimate in trauma. And in the case of, say, African-Americans who are so disconnected in many ways from our ancestral homeland of Africa, the South is as good as it gets as far as an ancestral homeland. And alongside the trauma, the historical trauma that that region represents for us, there is family, there's kin, there are places of comfort. I guess that's what constitutes home and what keeps us coming back. What do we put in front of our homes? A welcome mat.

Mallory Noe-Payne: Oh, I was going to say a mailbox. I'm glad you answered it for me.

Michael Paul Williams: Yeah, a welcome mat. And that's home is first and foremost, a place of welcome. That welcome was re-extended to Haley. You could argue that that welcome has never truly been extended to Black people in America and various other classes of people, including the people who were here first.

Mallory Noe-Payne: Here's my question for you. Does the American South, is it home? Does it feel like home?

Michael Paul Williams: It's the only home I've ever known. Even now, I mean, my father's from Alabama. He hardly ever went back. With him, I went to Alabama with him once. I think I was 12, 13 years old. Once. He went back for funerals and we never had a conversation about that. I wish he were here. I wish I could talk to him about that. But he, no, he wasn't trying to go back to Alabama a whole lot. I went to Alabama for a journalism project. It was the anniversary of the Selma March. And that involved me doing a lot of driving by myself throughout Alabama from Selma to Montgomery to Birmingham. And, you know, at night and, you know, there were some thoughts as I was making that drive. It's the late 1990s or maybe it was the early 2000s even. I can't remember, but, I'm in Alabama.

Mallory Noe-Payne: What do you think it would take to accomplish, you know, feeling truly at home in the South.

Michael Paul Williams: An acknowledgement?

Mallory Noe-Payne: Mm-hmm.

Michael Paul Williams: You know, I keep going back. It's like a touchstone, because it seems almost like a dream. Now I keep going back to May and June and in the summer of 2020. And I just felt like we were at a space. And, you know, for some people, I'm sure it was not a pleasant space in their memory, but in my memory, it's like, yeah, we're in this pandemic. And, yeah, there's a lot of turmoil, but people are in a head space, because sometimes turmoil produces that head space where they were acknowledging some things.

Mallory Noe-Payne: Yeah.

Michael Paul Williams: And acknowledging that we need to work on some things and acknowledging the past and the injustice and the mistreatment, because they had all seen it so vividly for nine minutes on videotape.

Mallory Noe-Payne: George Floyd's murder.

Michael Paul Williams: Yes.

Mallory Noe-Payne: That's what you're referring to, yeah?

Michael Paul Williams: Yes. And minds were open. You feel safer when minds are open. What would the state of Mississippi be like, for instance? Mississippi, the heart of darkness, an absolute reign of terror took place, a place with the largest percentage of Black population of any state in America. What would it look like if Mississippi sent out that sort of call to folks in Chicago and Detroit? We want you back. There are opportunities here. Help us build Mississippi up. We need your talents. We need your energy.

Mallory Noe-Payne: Alongside an acknowledgement. Yes.

Michael Paul Williams: Yes. An acknowledgement.

Mallory Noe-Payne: And an apology.

Michael Paul Williams: Yes. Yes. We know what this state has done for you so we are offering a free college education to your offspring as a form of repair, of reparation. Just use your imagination and do the right thing.

Mallory Noe-Payne: I want to talk about reparations because that's what we're talking about. That's what the extending of the hand is I mean reparations means many things. The UN has guidelines on remedy and reparations and it includes things like full public disclosure of the truth, public apology, acceptance of responsibility, restoring the dignity and rights of the victims all of these things are included in the idea of reparations and that's the quote/unquote welcoming, that's the quote/unquote extended hand, right?

Michael Paul Williams: Does any of those things you just mentioned sound remotely like the American experience? Well, how do you get there? I mean, it's a roadmap. And we aren't in the car yet. I mean, how do you get there? I mean, you can't -- we're doing the opposite of reparations. I mean, one of the things you mentioned about the acknowledgement of what happened, we are doing the opposite of that. Here in Virginia, we are doing -- we are trying to restrain teachers from teaching what really happened so that our children can learn what really happened because it's divisive. It's, we are literally going backwards on this front. We are running away from the concept of repair and reparation.

Mallory Noe-Payne: And that's not even to mention money.

Michael Paul Williams: Yeah. I mean, you can't, even get --

Mallory Noe-Payne: So, I mean, let's talk about money for a second too, because we don't really get into it in the story. But financially speaking, Germany is known for creating sort of the largest landmark financial reparations process that's ever happened, amounting to more than $60 billion over the years. And that includes direct payments to individuals and families. It includes payments in large part to the state of Israel. Much later in 2000, German companies began voluntarily making payments to former slave laborers. Jews were used as slave laborers by German companies during the war and they paid out more than $4 billion to more than a million people around the world. There are a lot of very valid criticisms of German reparations. Survivors have to go through very painful bureaucratic processes, the cash awards are often quite meager, but the bottom line is I think that German financial reparations and that system does demonstrate that it is possible.

Michael Paul Williams: Hand me the paperwork. Show me the red tape. I'll cut through it. We can't even have a conversation. And if we can't have that conversation, that tells me that America still views me as every bit as not

human, as my ancestors who were enslaved, because you are not acknowledging their worth nor mine. If you feel like you can do that thing, you can exploit them, you can have them build the wealth of this nation, on their backs, their enslaved backs, then you don't owe me anything. It's an insult. It's a multi-generational insult.

Mallory Noe-Payne: Multi-generational. You know, you hear people say, this was quote/unquote, so long ago. Time to move on.

Michael Paul Williams: Oh, that's convenient.

Mallory Noe-Payne: But I want to point out how clear it is from Haley's story that this lives forever.

Michael Paul Williams: Yeah. Yeah. Yeah, that trauma literally lives in our bodies. It lived in hers. You know, I think that thing inside, that multi-generational trauma is what compelled her to go there in the first place. She says, did she say she feels more at home, safer in Germany than she felt anywhere else?

Mallory Noe-Payne: What does that say?

Michael Paul Williams: What does that say? I guess it speaks to the capacity of human beings to come full circle and communities and even nations to come full circle in the quest for healing. But it can't start unless you acknowledge the disease. [Music]

Mallory Noe-Payne: So in this episode, we heard the story of someone, Haley, who can't stop digging and learning more about her family history for whom the past is never past. Next episode, we're going to look at a different family with a different history and how narratives shift and change over time. >> Female 1 And I had friends visiting and they would look at the pictures and one of them turned to me and said, "Was your grandfather a Nazi?" [Music] Memory Wars is a production of Radio IQ, distributed by PRX. This research and the resulting podcast were made possible in part by a grant from the German-American Fulbright Commission. I'm Mallory Noe-Payne. And you also heard from Michael Paul Williams. Oluwakemi Aladesuyi is our story editor. Additional editing from Caitlin Pierce. Original music is by Sun Rain and Spooky Fish, with sound design and mixing by Chad Skinner and Danny Ramez at Half Moon Audio. Ruth Tam designed our logo and feature image on our website. And we recorded this episode at the Studio of Virginia Video Network. You can find out more about the show and a link to suggested reading at radioiq.org. This podcast is supported by radioiq and the listeners who donate to that member station. If you appreciate innovative reporting like this, you can join those listeners by going to radioiq.org, and there's a donate button in the upper right-hand corner. Thanks for listening and we'll be back in two weeks with the next episode. [Music]

Female 1: PRX.