



Friend or Foe?

When I was a child I was absolutely terrified of the entire German race. The stories my parents told me of the war convinced me that the people of Germany were my enemy and always would be.

Thinking about it now, I doubt that my parents ever met a real, live German person because even though my dad was in the RAF during the war, he was stationed on the sunny beaches of Sri Lanka rather than Normandy or Dunkirk. But the stories and the propaganda my parents had known and passed on to me were enough to make me fear and hate strangers who lived hundreds of miles away.

It's ironic that the first German person I met (when I was 17) had been an officer in the Nazi army. I was hitch-hiking through Italy with my boyfriend when a heavy fog meant the lorry we were travelling in had to pull into a service station for the night. We had very little money and were stealing abandoned bread rolls from trays in the cafeteria when the German approached us.

With a big, friendly smile he spoke in a language I didn't understand but knew to be the voice of my enemy. When the boyfriend and I looked confused (and in my case, bloody terrified) he said, "I'm sorry, I thought you were German." As if.

He invited us to spend the night in his motor home instead of the toilet floor where we had planned on sleeping and once inside he fed us with salamis, cheese and red wine. We were on our second bottle when he told us of his past...

"I was an officer in the German army during the occupation of France. One day my unit entered a farmhouse. I heard a whimpering coming from the cellar and there I found a family huddled together, the two children crying and shaking with fear.

"I spoke very little French at the time so to reassure them I took a chocolate bar from my pocket and offered it to them. They refused to take it and later I discovered why - the British had been dropping propaganda leaflets over France saying that the Nazis ate babies."

The boyfriend and I should probably have headed for the toilets at this point but being a little bit drunk we stuck around and argued with him. Surely he was not going to try to deny the atrocities that the Nazis had committed?

They may not have eaten babies but we had seen photographs of the people in the

concentration and death camps when we had visited the Holocaust museum in Israel only a few weeks earlier. "Don't believe everything you see in a photograph," our new German friend said.



Gill with her friend Rhuksana with their children.

I look back now and think: Were we just stupidly naïve to believe that this man who had been a Nazi officer was harmless? Why did I feel in his presence that my fear of the entire German nation was slipping away?

I should have been more scared, not less. We all know that awful things happened in the war but I still believe that this man knew nothing of the greater evils being committed

"So busy being afraid of the differences between our cultures that we don't find out what we have in common"

by some of his fellow countrymen.

This has made me think about how we can so easily build up a wrong picture of someone because we believe that if one member of their race/religion/colour has done wrong then everyone must be guilty.

The propaganda of today is our local paper reporting bad news stories from all sides of our community. I've lived and

worked in Brierfield for eight years now, and for better or worse, I'm here to stay.

We have some fantastic community groups who work hard to bring the English and the Pakistani heritage residents together but we shouldn't really need government funding to get on with each other.

The biggest problem here in Brierfield is that many of us are so busy being afraid of the differences between our cultures that we don't find out what we have in common.

I know that a lot of Pakistani parents here worry that if their children become friends with ours then their kids will adopt the worst excesses of our culture; the boyfriends, drinking alcohol, watching X Factor. But those things are not what I want for my children either.

Last Friday, a middle-aged English man stopped me in the street in Brierfield and asked if there was a riot going on further up the road. When I looked, I saw it was just a group of Pakistani boys dressed in their white gowns, on their way to the local Mosque for Friday prayers.

The man could have asked the boys (nicely) what they were doing instead of asking me but he was too afraid. He, like many others would rather assume the worst. Then maybe he would tell someone when he got home and before you know it there would be rumours of riots that could... well, start a riot.

I walked away from this man thinking that things would never get better and then something happened to prove me wrong.

A little boy, maybe six years old, was sitting in the middle of the road on a blind bend. He was trying to fix the wheel on his scooter and refused to move. Judging by his heavy accent I presumed he must be from one of the Irish families who had recently moved into Brierfield.

I was thinking about dragging him to the pavement before we were both killed when a Pakistani man saw what was happening and came over. He quietly knelt down beside the boy and quickly fixed the scooter with his car key. That's all it

took to avert a disaster and maybe help to build something positive between our three cultures.

What if that little Irish boy went home and told someone what had happened and they told someone else? Before you know it there could be rumours of racial harmony that could... well, lead to racial harmony. It's easy really, isn't it?