

Audible Originals presents:

*Say You're Sorry*

Hosted by Lux Alptraum

## Episode 8: The Call For Reparations

*[intro music; electronic, thoughtful crescendo with guitar notes]*

### **Lux Alptraum:**

I've known for my whole entire life that I'm a third-generation Holocaust survivor. I don't even remember the first time I heard about the Holocaust, or that my grandparents lost everything but their lives in Hitler's genocidal campaign. It feels like knowledge I was born with.

And given what a core part of my identity being a descendent of Holocaust survivors is, it feels strange to admit that, until I started working on this podcast, I had never really thought much about reparations. I mean, yes, I knew there was a campaign to get America to pay reparations to the descendants of enslaved people. And I knew that campaign was controversial.

But I'd never really thought about the fact that, as a descendant of Holocaust survivors, I was a beneficiary of reparations. And I'd never considered the possibility that surviving a genocide wasn't enough to guarantee widespread support for this kind of remedy.

*[orchestral and piano music plays]*

I'm Lux Alptraum, and this is *Say You're Sorry*, a podcast about public apologies. And in this episode, we're talking about what it is that reparations actually repair.

A quick warning: this episode involves discussions of extreme violence and genocide.

### **David Gottlieb:**

Life was, in the shtetl, it was a religious life, very religious. Shabbos, we didn't work. But six days in the week, we did work.

### **Lux Alptraum:**

That's a 1992 interview with my grandfather, David — or as I think of him, Sabba. He was born in Poland in 1918 and grew up working alongside his carpenter father, building houses. By the age of 23, he was married with two kids and serving in the army.

My grandfather spent most of the war in Siberia, and he ultimately survived. The rest of his family wasn't so lucky.

**David Gottlieb:**

All of the family got killed. My mother's brothers, my mother, my father. My wife and children.

**Lux Alptraum:**

After the war, my grandfather ended up in a displaced persons camp in Germany, where he met my grandmother Ida — also known as Bubbe. I don't have any recordings of her talking about her experiences in the Holocaust. Unlike my grandfather, she wasn't particularly interested in sharing her story. But I can tell you that she was a Lithuanian woman who spent years in the Kovno Ghetto and managed to escape to the woods right as the ghetto was being liquidated and the residents forced into labor or killed.

My grandparents got married a few months after they met and they spent the next few years trying to get visas to go to America. It was a complex process that had them going back and forth between Germany and France. But finally, they secured their papers. And in 1950, they boarded a ship and arrived in America.

**David Gottlieb:**

It was August, I think the 22nd of August. The name of the ship was *General W. G. Haan*. And I came to Boston.

**Lux Alptraum:**

Which is where my grandparents were living when the first Holocaust reparations programs were created a few years later in 1953.

I should note here that the term "Holocaust reparations" actually refers to dozens of different compensation programs created for survivors of the Holocaust since the 1950s. Some of them were one-time payments, some were long-term pensions, and they all had different approval criteria.

The original German program was called *Wiedergutmachung* which means "to make good again." I've heard my family use this phrase too, but not everybody likes it. Today, many advocacy groups consider it offensive because money can't actually make things good again.

My grandparents have been dead for over 20 years, so I couldn't ask them how they felt about reparations. So I went for the next best thing: my dad and his siblings.

As the oldest of the group, my uncle Szaja was five years old when the German government agreed to start making cash payments to Holocaust survivors in 1953.

**Szaja:**

I remember going to the office of the lawyer. The one that was arranging the payments.

**Lux Alptraum:**

Getting reparations was a complicated process, one that required filling out applications and petitioning the German government, and a lawyer made the process smoother. If you didn't have that help, it was much harder. Even if you did have that help, reparations weren't guaranteed.

**Szaja:**

And by the way, my dad made an application too, and he got rejected.

**Lux Alptraum:**

Merely surviving the Holocaust did not guarantee payouts. My grandparents met the initial eligibility requirements of these first programs because they'd both spent time in a displaced persons camp and were now living in the United States. But to be approved for payments, you needed proof that you'd been directly hurt by the Nazis — that they'd imprisoned you, severely injured you, or stolen from you.

Because my grandmother had been imprisoned in the Kovno Ghetto, she qualified. But as far as the Germans were concerned, my grandfather's experiences didn't count.

**Fran:**

Reparations are only on the basis of actual damages. And I think the sad part about that is that people who suffered... you didn't get reparations.

**Lux Alptraum:**

That's my aunt Fran. And it wasn't just my grandfather who was left out of the first wave of reparations. There were many survivors whose experiences were deemed insufficient or who otherwise didn't qualify. That's one of the reasons why Holocaust reparations weren't a one-and-done process. In fact, organizations have continued to advocate for more reparations programs and expanded access for survivors and their descendants to this day.

**Dr. Bernd Reiter:**

In 2014, there was another decision made to pay retroactive pensions to folks who had been forced to work as enslaved laborers in a Nazi ghetto.

**Lux Alptraum:**

That's Dr. Bernd Reiter, a professor at Texas Tech University who's researched the impact that reparations can have on societies as they recover from atrocities like

the Holocaust. And as someone who grew up in Germany, Bernd feels that Holocaust reparations programs have achieved something extremely important.

**Bernd Reiter:**

Germany has recognized the evils done by the enslavement that they conducted and by the killing of people, so that was the first step. And then to follow up with action in the form of reparation to actually address this and allow people to prosper if they have been robbed of the means to prosper, I think that was then the second logical step. And to me, that has created a culture in contemporary Germany that is very... There's very few people, only really on the extreme, extreme right, who do not know about the Holocaust, who deny the Holocaust, or who do not have a, sort of, latent sentiment of guilt.

**Lux Alptraum:**

But for my family, it's not quite that simple. When I asked my aunt how my grandmother felt about reparations, it became clear that she had a different view.

**Fran:**

It's such an interesting question to ask, "How do you feel about getting something?" I mean, are you trying to establish whether or not she felt entitled to it? I'm not sure what the "feel" is. Money is just a payment toward relief, in my opinion; relief of obligation and accountability for harm that you did against human rights. It was a genocide after all. So, I don't think it made her feel anything in relation to her suffering during the war.

**Philip:**

The money is designed to liberate Germany from any long-term guilt or wrongdoing. It's to compensate so that they can move on in general public endeavors.

**Lux Alptraum:**

That's my dad. And like my aunt, he doesn't really see reparations as something that made my grandmother good again — no matter what the name may have promised. From his perspective, the pension my grandmother received from Germany wasn't about her at all.

**Philip:**

Reparations are not for the victims. They're for the people who need to, kind of, absolve their conscience. Giving money to somebody doesn't solve anything. Compensation like that tends not to solve any of the problems that are associated with what they did. So, they give money, they said, "We gave money. That's the best we can do."

**Lux Alptraum:**

This sentiment isn't a new one. Even in the 1950s, when Holocaust reparations were first being negotiated, there were many people who objected to them.

**Bernd Reiter:**

Not everybody was in favor of accepting reparations because it was perceived as, sort of, paying your way out of guilt.

**Lux Alptraum:**

One of the people who felt that way was my great-uncle, Zvi. Like my grandfather, Zvi and his wife Zahava had lived in Poland and had been fortunate enough to escape their hometown before the Nazis arrived and began a campaign of mass murder. But they still suffered dearly.

Zvi was conscripted to work in the mines and lost a lung due to the working conditions. After the Holocaust, Zvi, Zahava, and their children relocated to Israel. And when the reparations programs were initially announced, Zvi wanted nothing to do with them. This is how my mother explains it.

**Gail:**

Zvi refused to ask for reparations because he was too proud and he wanted nothing from the Germans. He didn't ever want to hear, see, or think about them again.

**Lux Alptraum:**

A lot of Israelis agreed with Zvi. When Israel's parliament — the Knesset — decided to accept money from Germany, an opposition rally drew thousands of people.

**Bernd Reiter:**

There were protests outside in Israel when this was decided in the Knesset. And, you know, from what I can fathom and gather, is that that was the sentiment. "This is a cheap way out."

**Lux Alptraum:**

But Israel still took the money. And Bernd says the country benefited tremendously from it.

**Bernd Reiter:**

It seems very clear that it was a very important component of the viability of Israel early on. You know, in terms of the economic viability, even infrastructure. I'm aware that some of this reparations money was used to build infrastructure in Israel.

**Lux Alptraum:**

And the same was ultimately true for Zvi and Zahava. Despite his initial refusal, Zvi

eventually did apply for reparations, right as the deadline was running out. Before getting reparations, Zvi and Zahava were struggling farmworkers, barely scraping by. But after they started receiving payments from Germany, everything was different.

**Gail:**

They were able to buy a farm and a homestead, essentially, build homes, and eventually the whole family, the four children as well as Zvi and Zahava, all lived in, and still... well, the ones who are still alive, still live on this moshav, which is a collective farm. And they thrived. I mean, they had a very, very good life. And their children, who were our generation, had what would pass as upper-middle-class American lives in the homes they built and the lives they lived. But the basis for it all was the reparations that Zvi eventually gave in and applied for.

**Lux Alptraum:**

My grandmother also bought property. In fact, she built up a mini real estate empire in the Boston area. And it's true that those buildings didn't fix her mental health or address the trauma that she'd endured during her years in the Kovno Ghetto. But they did manage to accomplish something.

After the Holocaust, my grandparents had lost everything. But they managed to build a life in the US that enabled their five children to go to college and live comfortable — and in some cases more than comfortable — lives. When my grandmother died, she still owned one building; it ultimately helped pay for my college education and ensured that I don't have debt.

Maybe that would have happened without my grandmother's pension from Germany. But reparations certainly made it easier for her, and for me.

Thousands of Israelis protested their country's decision to accept financial aid from Germany. Zvi resisted applying for reparations because he didn't want anything from the people who had harmed him. And my father and his siblings feel conflicted about them because they see the way their mother continued to struggle, even with the additional assistance. But we all materially benefited from the program.

It's one thing to feel conflicted about the money you're receiving in reparations when that money is an option — to quibble over what the proper terms of restitution are when your community has access to it. But what happens when the harm you've experienced is virtually erased from history; when you have to fight for your trauma to be recognized and understood, let alone to be deemed worthy of cash payments?

For two tribes in Namibia, that's not a rhetorical question.

*[transitional electronic music]*

**Lux Alptraum:**

Ngondi Kamatuka has this memory of a story he was told when he was growing up in Namibia.

**Ngondi Kamatuka:**

I think I was about seven years old. And within the Ovaherero people, it was expected that before we go to bed, every evening, around the fireplace in the village, the older generation would talk about whatever topic was for that night. And so often they would mention the Battle of Otjihinamaparero. And I was just intrigued by what they were talking about? “What battle?”

**Lux Alptraum:**

As Ngondi started looking, he began to see more and more traces of the battle all around him. But the more he learned, the more confused he became. Near his grandparents’ house, there was a cemetery full of German soldiers.

**Ngondi Kamatuka:**

“Why did they build it here? You said they came from a faraway land. Why are they not buried over there?” She said, “No, there was a war between us and them.” “A war? Oh, okay, Grandma. So, where are the Ovaherero soldiers buried? I assume we had soldiers fighting the Germans.” And for a long time, they would not tell me.

**Lux Alptraum:**

But one day his grandmother finally gave him the answer.

**Ngondi Kamatuka:**

“You ask too many questions, but let me tell you this thing. You can never find a cemetery for our people.” I said, “Why not?” “Because there’s none. And everywhere you walk, you are walking on the soul of your people, of our people.”

**Lux Alptraum:**

Ngondi’s people, the Ovaherero, also sometimes referred to as Herero, had once been a major presence in Southwest Africa, in what is now Namibia. Ovaherero culture is built around cattle herding. Here’s how Vekuii Rukoro, the paramount chief of the Ovaherero people, describes his community:

**Vekuii Rukoro:**

We are nomadic people. From way back, we are cattle herders. Without cattle, without land, really the Herero wouldn’t exist.

**Lux Alptraum:**

The Ovaherero had long been one of several tribes in Namibia and they had a

history of dealing with the kinds of skirmishes that arise when two different groups of people want to control the same land. But they had always managed to get by.

**Vekuii Rukoro:**

Back then, especially among the Ovaherero people, poverty basically was something that never existed. They didn't want for anything.

**Lux Alptraum:**

So when German missionaries first began arriving on their lands, it seemed possible that they'd find a way to live together more or less peacefully. But in the late 19th century, Germany began sending more and more settlers to colonize the area.

**Ngondi Kamatuka:**

The European powers were accumulating foreign territories, foreign lands. And Germany felt they had to become a party to that.

**Lux Alptraum:**

Namibia is largely desert; it's the driest country in sub-Saharan Africa. So arable land is pretty scarce. And the Germans were determined to monopolize it. Over the next few decades, Germans began claiming farmland for themselves and pushing two specific tribes — the Ovaherero and the Nama — off their own land. And they didn't just take the land. If Ovaherero or Nama cattle wandered onto German farms, suddenly they were declared German property.

**Vekuii Rukoro:**

They went for all our cattle, they went for all our land, made sure that... Without land, the Herero would be nobody. And without his cattle, he would be a pauper. He would be reduced to a mere laborer. That would be the beginning of the end for us.

**Lux Alptraum:**

Like other European colonial powers, Germany saw Africa as theirs for the taking. By 1903, there were over 4,500 Germans in Namibia, more than in any other German colony. And as far as the Germans were concerned, the Indigenous people of Southwest Africa weren't a people with their own culture, and history, and land rights. They were just an obstacle to German domination — a belief the Germans made clear through their callous, violent treatment of the Ovaherero and Nama people and sexual assault of the women specifically.

By the 1890s, German troops had started an explicit military campaign against Ovaherero and Nama communities. At first, Namibian leaders were able to win some of these battles. But German violence and displacement of local communities continued to escalate. And then, on January 12, 1904, the Ovaherero people



decided that enough was enough, and rose up in revolt against Germany. About 100 German settlers were killed.

**Ngondi Kamatuka:**

So what does Kaiser Wilhelm II do? He finds somebody who was prominent in putting down the Wahehe rebellion in present-day Tanzania, and also the person who put down the Boxer Rebellion in China. That man was Lieutenant General Lothar von Trotha. Hand-picked based on what he has done in Tanzania and in China. He assembled an armada of 14,000 German troops and they started their genocidal campaign.

**Lux Alptraum:**

Over the next four years, Germany systematically worked to eliminate the Ovaherero and Nama people. An official extermination order was issued, and von Trotha's troops worked to carry it out. Thousands of Ovaherero and Nama people were trapped in the desert, where they were left to die of starvation and dehydration — and in order to ensure that that happened, Germany's soldiers poisoned water holes as well. Survivors were taken to prison camps.

**Ngondi Kamatuka:**

The prisoners of war and people who were brought there would die of extreme weather conditions, working, being worked to death, things like that. They were decapitated; and the wives and the children would use pieces of glass to take the flesh off, pretty much boil them.

**Lux Alptraum:**

The bones of some of these people were shipped off to Germany for experimentation. One of the German scientists who collected these remains later sold his collection to the American Museum of Natural History in New York City — which Nama and Ovaherero communities only discovered in 2017.

By 1908, the Ovaherero were reduced from a population of 80,000 to just 15,000 people. The Nama population was cut in half.

**Ngondi Kamatuka:**

Ovaherero people today, it's only 240,000. An economist at the International Monetary Fund did a calculation; if that had not happened, we would be almost 2 million people today.

**Lux Alptraum:**

There's a direct connection between the atrocities experienced by Vekuii and Ngondi's ancestors and the ones my own grandparents endured — and it's not just that they were both perpetrated by the Germans.

**Dr. Zoe Samudzi:**

I've been doing a lot of work around eugenics, and so I was like, "Why do we call Nazi science 'Nazi science'? What is special about Nazi science?" I found a book called *Exterminate all the Brutes*, which was about how we have to think about the kind of Nazi apparatus through this frame of colonialism. And I was like, "I didn't know that Germans were colonizers."

**Lux Alptraum:**

That's Dr. Zoe Samudzi, a sociologist who researches the genocide of the Ovaherero and Nama people.

**Dr. Zoe Samudzi:**

I saw that the way that that genocide against the Herero and Nama people, in the colony of German Southwest Africa, which is now Namibia, had such ripple effects and such a profound foundation for how Germany went about committing subsequent genocides.

**Lux Alptraum:**

Much of what we associate with Hitler and his regime actually began many decades before. The word *Lebensraum* — basically, the German version of Manifest Destiny — was used to justify Germany's World War II annexation of Europe. But Hitler didn't come up with *Lebensraum*. It was in use by the early 1900s, when Germans justified colonizing parts of Africa.

There were other parallels, too, in the ways that Germans treated Africans in their colonies and the way they later treated Jews.

**Zoe Samudzi:**

Miscegenation is banned in all German colonies in 1905. Years later, miscegenation is banned in Europe.

**Lux Alptraum:**

And the camps that Ovaherero and Nama prisoners of war were taken to were labor and death camps. They weren't industrialized the way Nazi camps like Dachau and Auschwitz were, but they still had the same end goal.

**Zoe Samudzi:**

There are literally pictures of Herero and Nama people standing in queues at these railroad stops to be loaded into train cars and shipped off to the coast or to these different concentration camps. And it was so horrifying because the images were so familiar, and yet that particular act and structure of violence was completely unfamiliar.

**Lux Alptraum:**

Ovaherero and Nama prisoners were worked to death or subjected to medical experimentation. One camp, Shark Island, was better known as Death Island.

**Zoe Samudzi:**

Death Island was the site of the most extensive scientific experimentation. There was this Dr. Bofinger who was notorious for none of his patients ever surviving.

**Lux Alptraum:**

Ngondi says the Ovaherero still tell stories about the horrors of Lüderitz, the city by Shark Island.

**Ngondi Kamatuka:**

When people heard they were being sent to Lüderitz, some of them committed harakiri, disembowelment, committing suicide, because they knew they were not going to come back.

**Lux Alptraum:**

Even one of the most iconic symbols of the Nazi military has roots in Namibia.

**Ngondi Kamatuka:**

You know where the term comes from? The brown shirt? From Namibia, because Namibia because Namibia's a desert.

**Lux Alptraum:**

Many Nazis — including the eugenicist Eugen Fischer and Hitler's second in command, Hermann Göring — were either descendants of Germans who'd colonized Namibia, or were colonizers themselves.

**Ngondi Kamatuka:**

They got their on-the-job training from their grandparents who were engaged in this in Namibia.

**Lux Alptraum:**

And yet, despite all of these direct links, the suffering of Ovaherero and Nama people hasn't received the same global recognition or respect that my grandparents' experiences have. Particularly when it comes to reparations.

*[wavy electronic music plays]*

*[Heidmarie Wiczorek-Zeul](#): We pay tribute, I pay tribute, in the name of the German government, to those brave women and men, particularly from the Herero and the Nama, who fought and suffered so that their children, and their children's children, could live in freedom.*

**Lux Alptraum:**

That's Heidemarie Wieczorek-Zeul. In 2004, she was Germany's Development Aid Minister and she attended a Namibian ceremony commemorating the 100th anniversary of the Ovaherero people rising up against Germany.

The ceremony was held in Waterberg — the site of one of the major battles of the Ovaherero and Nama war against Germany. Thousands of people attended the ceremony, crowding into risers that had been set up in the desert. Ovaherero men wore colonial German military uniforms, Ovaherero women wore red Victorian dresses paired with their traditional hats shaped to look like cattle horns — an outfit adopted by Ovaherero women as a response to the genocide.

*[clip from Namibia documentary]*

*Felicity: To show that you're a Herero woman, you have to wear it. It's a must to us. Whether there is a wedding, or whether there is an occasion, or whether there is something, you have to wear it.*

**Lux Alptraum:**

And at the center of it all was a small stage under an olive-green canopy, where Heidemarie delivered her speech.

*[Heidemarie Wieczorek-Zeul](#): I honor, with great respect, your ancestors who died fighting against their German oppressors.*

**Lux Alptraum:**

In the press, Heidemarie's words were described as an apology; the first time Germany had ever expressed regret for the genocide of the Ovaherero people. But that's not how Ngondi remembers it.

**Ngondi Kamatuka:**

I was there. I won't call it an apology. So, Heidi-Marie read a prepared statement, finished the prepared statement, tried to walk off the stage. Somebody yelled, "How about an apology?" She returned to the mic and said, "Everything I said should be seen as part of an apology."

**Lux Alptraum:**

But Heidemarie's statement was quickly dismissed as personal opinion, not a statement on behalf of the German government. And to Ngondi, it simply wasn't enough to count.

**Ngondi Kamatuka:**

We have never received an apology as far as we are concerned.

**Lux Alptraum:**

Heidemarie's speech came in the midst of a growing campaign for reparations. Just three years before, a foundation led by an Ovaherero paramount chief had sued for \$2 billion. Germany wouldn't even participate in the lawsuit, and the case was ultimately dropped.

**Ngondi Kamatuka:**

Germany is the thief that has stolen something. But as a thief, Germany wants to come to the court of law and say, "I'm the thief but I cannot accept the penalty."

**Lux Alptraum:**

Today, Ngondi lives in Kansas and serves as President of the Association of the Ovaherero Genocide in the US, one of several organizations around the globe that's devoted to seeking justice for the genocide.

And for these organizations, justice means one very specific thing: reparations.

And they see this as a very reasonable ask. After all, Germany already paid out reparations to people who suffered during the war with the Ovaherero and Nama tribes. They just didn't happen to be African people.

**Ngondi Kamatuka:**

A delegation left from Namibia, of Germans of course, went to Germany and claimed that their farms were damaged during the war. "We need reparations." Germany paid reparations for Germans in Namibia. So this is not the first time. The only difference is that they were white, we are Black.

**Lux Alptraum:**

Ngondi and Vekuii have been fighting for a real apology, coupled with reparations, for over a decade at this point. And everywhere they turned, they heard the same thing: no. Then, this past spring 2021, just as we were wrapping up production on this podcast, it seemed for a second that things might finally change.

On May 28th, Germany's Foreign Minister Heiko Maas made a big announcement, saying, "We will now officially refer to these events as what they are from today's perspective: genocide." Along with that announcement, Germany pledged \$1.3 billion over the next 30 years for development aid to Namibia.

And this might seem like a win. It's recognition and money. But as more and more details of the agreement were revealed, it became clear that this wasn't actually what Ngondi and Vekuii had been fighting for at all.

First, Germany has very specifically said that these should NOT be considered reparations, arguing that the genocide happened too long ago, before the 1948

convention on genocide set up the rules and definitions for how to handle these crimes. Which, to me, sounds a lot like, “Well, if we have to pay reparations in this case, we might have to pay reparations to everybody else we brutalized during colonialism.”

Of course, Vekuii doesn’t have a lot of sympathy for that particular problem.

**Vekuii Rukoro:**

That’s Germany’s problem, not mine. I guess it was fun to be a big colonizer, but then you should have realized there will be consequences of one kind or another. It comes with the territory of being a big imperialist player around the world. One way or another, justice has to be done.

**Lux Alptraum:**

And to add insult to injury, Ngondi and Vekuii had no part in these negotiations at all. In fact, the Nama and Ovaherero leadership weren’t even consulted on the money allegedly meant to benefit their tribes.

**Ngondi Kamatuka:**

The people up north were not affected. So, today the government is dominated by the Northern tribe, the Ovambo people. And then they started negotiating with Germany on behalf of us. And we are saying, “No, you cannot do that. We are capable of speaking for ourselves, and you cannot take that upon yourself. It is not incumbent upon you to represent us. We can represent ourselves.”

**Vekuii Rukoro:**

As far as we are concerned, government has simply hijacked our process for ulterior purposes, for their own bilateral development discussions with the German government. They can reach any agreement with the German government; those agreements are not worth the piece of paper they are written on.

**Lux Alptraum:**

When we reached out to Vekuii to see how he felt about this agreement, he forwarded us an email with his position. In it, he slams the deal saying that “It is clear that Germany has once again bamboozled the Namibian government into a meaningless and sell-out agreement. It is a monumental shame and a shocking betrayal of trust.”

We reached out to one of the Namibian officials involved in the negotiations but didn’t hear back.

And while \$1.3 billion might seem like a lot of money, when you compare it to other cases of reparations, it starts to seem a lot less impressive. For example, Germany

recently paid out \$662 million to Holocaust survivors just for COVID relief. The Namibians are getting about twice that but it's being paid out over 30 years.

And in fact, Ngondi and Vekuii point out that the money isn't even going directly to them at all. Instead, Germany is giving the development aid to the Namibian government, a government that Ngondi and Vekuii say has largely disregarded the descendants of the genocide.

And this is actually one of the things that the Ovaherero and Nama people have in common with Holocaust victims — both had to really fight for reparations. As Bernd notes, even in the aftermath of the Holocaust, reparations weren't a guaranteed outcome.

**Bernd Reiter:**

Germany did not willingly embrace reparations or even an apology. There was a broad German sentiment against this at the time in the late '40s and early '50s. But there was a historical moment where a war had been lost, and it seems like, you know, for Germany to rejoin the international community, there was a condition. So there was international pressure for Germany to step up and do this.

**Lux Alptraum:**

To my dad, reparations seemed like nothing more than a way for Germany to clear its conscience and walk away from its crimes. But to Ngondi and Vekuii, reparations are a part of the process of restoring the autonomy of the Ovaherero and Nama people. And that process starts with a real, meaningful apology.

**Vekuii Rukoro:**

We don't want a computer-generated apology, a negotiated apology like the Namibian government and Germany are trying to do now. It's a big joke. You know, this is something that must come from your heart genuinely.

**Ngondi Kamatuka:**

This contrition is remorseful, and then ask us for forgiveness. The forgiving doesn't start with the issuance of the apology. There's a second stanza to that song. Let's go to the second stanza. We say, invite us so we can say we are willing to come and sit down with the Ovaherero and Nama people to talk about the way forward.

**Lux Alptraum:**

But it has to include reparations paid directly to the Ovaherero and Nama people; not just because the money itself is needed or might help these communities in their day-to-day lives, but because an apology alone doesn't even begin to address the magnitude of what was taken from the Ovaherero and Nama people.

**Ngondi Kamatuka:**

We lost our people. We lost land. We lost cattle. We lost our culture. We are now marginalized in Namibia. Poverty is all over the place because our wealth was taken away, our land was taken away, without any compensation whatsoever. So, you cannot say, "I'm sorry, I have wronged you." But again, that goes back to the racist behavior of Europeans that they practiced, continue to practice today, to say that "I'm the one who can tell you what's good for you. We know we did you wrong, but we can only do this. Because you know why? We are very powerful and we have the means to dictate to you what's good for you." That's unacceptable.

**Lux Alptraum:**

There's a specific reason why Zoe was inspired to study the Ovaherero and Nama genocide. Zoe's parents are from Zimbabwe, where a group called the Ndebele experienced its own genocide in the 1980s.

**Zoe Samudzi:**

There's just been no address, and no recourse. No curiosity about justice. No actual investment or desire for it.

**Lux Alptraum:**

For Zoe, the erasure of the Ndebele genocide, the erasure of the Ovaherero and Nama genocide, and the erasure of so much of the violence that was done to Africa through colonialism all go hand in hand.

**Zoe Samudzi:**

I think that there is an exception clause for genocide, that the destruction of Black people is... there's a necessity for it in the maintenance of the Western modern world.

**Lux Alptraum:**

And through that lens, the fact that Holocaust survivors continue to be paid reparations by Germany and other countries throughout Europe while the Ovaherero and Nama people are still fighting to have their claims recognized in court isn't about how these two different genocides unfolded, or how long ago they occurred. It's about who they happened to and where they took place.

**Zoe Samudzi:**

It matters that it was a genocide that was perpetrated in Europe. It's about the fact that it was a set of colonial practices in Europe.

**Lux Alptraum:**

And for those who weren't in Europe, the ramifications of colonialism and genocide are still being felt.



**Bernd Reiter:**

The damages caused to these countries that were colonized are there today. You can make, I think, a map of the world and see which countries are poor and which are rich. And you will find the most colonizing countries are rich and most colonized are poor, so I think it's very important.

**Lux Alptraum:**

Reparations didn't fix my family, and the process of getting them was bureaucratic, and painful, and ignored far too many people who deserved access to funds. But the fact that Germany began paying reparations to Holocaust survivors in the first place, and the fact that so many other European countries have created their own compensation funds for Holocaust survivors, sends a powerful message when other genocide survivors don't get that same consideration.

I can go pretty much anywhere in the world and tell people my grandparents survived the Holocaust and people will know what that means. Ngondi doesn't have the same experience.

**Ngondi Kamatuka:**

I visited the Holocaust Museum in Washington, DC. Very powerful story there. When I went to the Holocaust Museum, I sat outside and just reflected on what I had seen. I just sat there and reflected on what has happened to us. The point I'm driving at is this: that we, the Ovaherero and the Nama, have never had the opportunity to reflect upon what has happened to us. The trauma, the traumatic experiences, was generational. It hasn't stopped. So, these are the kind of things we need to sit down and discuss. It's like a healing process. We have never had a healing process.

**Lux Alptraum:**

There was no amount of money that was ever going to make my grandparents whole again — no cash settlement that could undo the horror of a genocide. And even the best, most carefully designed reparations program is going to be flawed and leave some people feeling overlooked or ignored.

But even as reparations will never be good enough, they're still essential. You can't decimate an entire people, rob them of their homes and eradicate their culture, and act like a nice little speech is a sufficient gesture. These are atrocities that no apology statement could ever adequately address. You need something material that helps begin the process of restoring what was lost, something of value that concretely recognizes a people's pain. You need reparations, not because they are money, but because they are recognition.

Because as the Ovaherero and Nama people know far too well, without reparations, without that recognition, the wound you've sustained can't even begin to close.

*[outro music; uptempo electronic percussion with guitar]*

*Say You're Sorry* was created by Lux Alptraum. This episode was written and hosted by Lux Alptraum and produced by Siona Peterous. Editing by Candace Manriquez Wrenn. Sound design and mixing by Ariana Martinez. Our theme music is by Michael Aquino. Episode art by Augusto Zambonato.

*Say You're Sorry* is a production of Bucket of Eels. Rose Eveleth is our executive producer. Lara Blackman is our executive producer for Audible.