

Germans and Jews – Is Reconciliation Possible?

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Since the concentration camps were liberated some sixty years ago, there are still many Jews throughout the world who will not buy German cameras or cars, let alone travel to Germany. Coming to terms with their nation's own dark past continues to be a painful process for Germans as well, including the current generation. There seems to be no better place to build a bridge of understanding than in today's schools.

Especially since the Wall came down, increasing public awareness of the most horrific crimes committed against humanity has been transmitted in many different ways. One small effort was initiated by me three years ago, when I, a child of German-Jewish survivors, first visited some of the Gymnasiums in Berlin and spoke openly to the students about the angst-ridden relationship forced on both our people as a result of the Shoah. Survivors, by recounting their own stories to young Germans, continue to play an important role in "Holocaust Education" in Germany, but as some students have asked me, "when can we learn about the past and our responsibility for the future, without feelings of guilt and shame?" My answer is "now," especially after the German hosting of the 2006 World Cup

when Germans could finally wave their nation's flag proudly without feeling weighted down by the burdens of their tortured past.

Similarly, young Jews must learn to eradicate remnants of anti-German feelings handed down to them by members of the generation who suffered terribly both during and after the Holocaust. As Berlin once contained a rich cultural and professional Jewish presence prior to 1933, today, Europe's fastest growing Jewish community is reasserting its connection to Germany's pre-Nazi past as it should -- as "citizens." As soon as young Germans and Jews no longer see themselves as perpetrators and victims of the past, more constructive identities can be forged, and the process of true reconciliation may burgeon.

Enabling the students in Berlin's Gymnasiums to confront their own feelings about the Holocaust and their own responsibilities in securing Germany's democratic future is no easy task. Prior to my visits, students prepare by reading relevant articles to help them participate in discussions amongst themselves and with me. Sharing my own earlier struggles as a first-generation American born to German-Jewish parents making his first trips to Germany, I have tried to explain through my workshops the difficulties of overcoming my own prejudices. Once students learned that I, as a Jew, needed to

rebuild my own bridge to Germany's past, they quickly recognize our common goal.

New vistas are opening up with each subsequent visit, and students express gratitude that I am not "just another person who is going to talk about the Holocaust." The purpose of my visits is broader, and with it, my message has hopefully become more compelling. Recognizing that most Germans are not fully aware of how diverse Judaism is, students are taught about its various sects and different practices. The joke, that when there are two Jews holding a discussion, you will usually hear three opinions, always gets chuckles. However, more importantly, young Germans learn that not all Jews agree on all issues, among them, how to deal with the latest Middle East crisis, let alone how to bring lasting peace to this troubled region.

Without minimizing the wretched distinctiveness of the Shoah, we have discussed other genocides, including the mass Turkish slaughter of Armenians, the killing fields in Cambodia, the ethnic cleansing in Bosnia, the tribal mass killings in Rwanda, and more recently, the atrocities in Dafur. I have also been able to share with the students my own feelings about my own country's jagged path, i.e. our brutal treatment of Native Americans, slavery and racial

oppression, and the more recent imperialistic incursions into Vietnam and Iraq.

In order to build trust and henceforth reconciliation, a real open dialogue must be established. As both the older and younger generations of Germans feel less constrained to speak about their own suffering as civilians during World War II, as they have done so more recently in their accounts of the Allied firebombing of Dresden and savage rape of one-million Berlin women, Jews must not retreat into a shell of "exclusive victimization."

The final lesson which I hope the students have learned each time I have left their school is the one by the Jewish transcendental philosopher, Martin Buber – "Anger and thirst for vengeance corrode the soul." Likewise, both the students and I have learned together that it is not guilt and suffering that should bind our people together, but the acceptance of a moral resonance that will truly lead to reconciliation.

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