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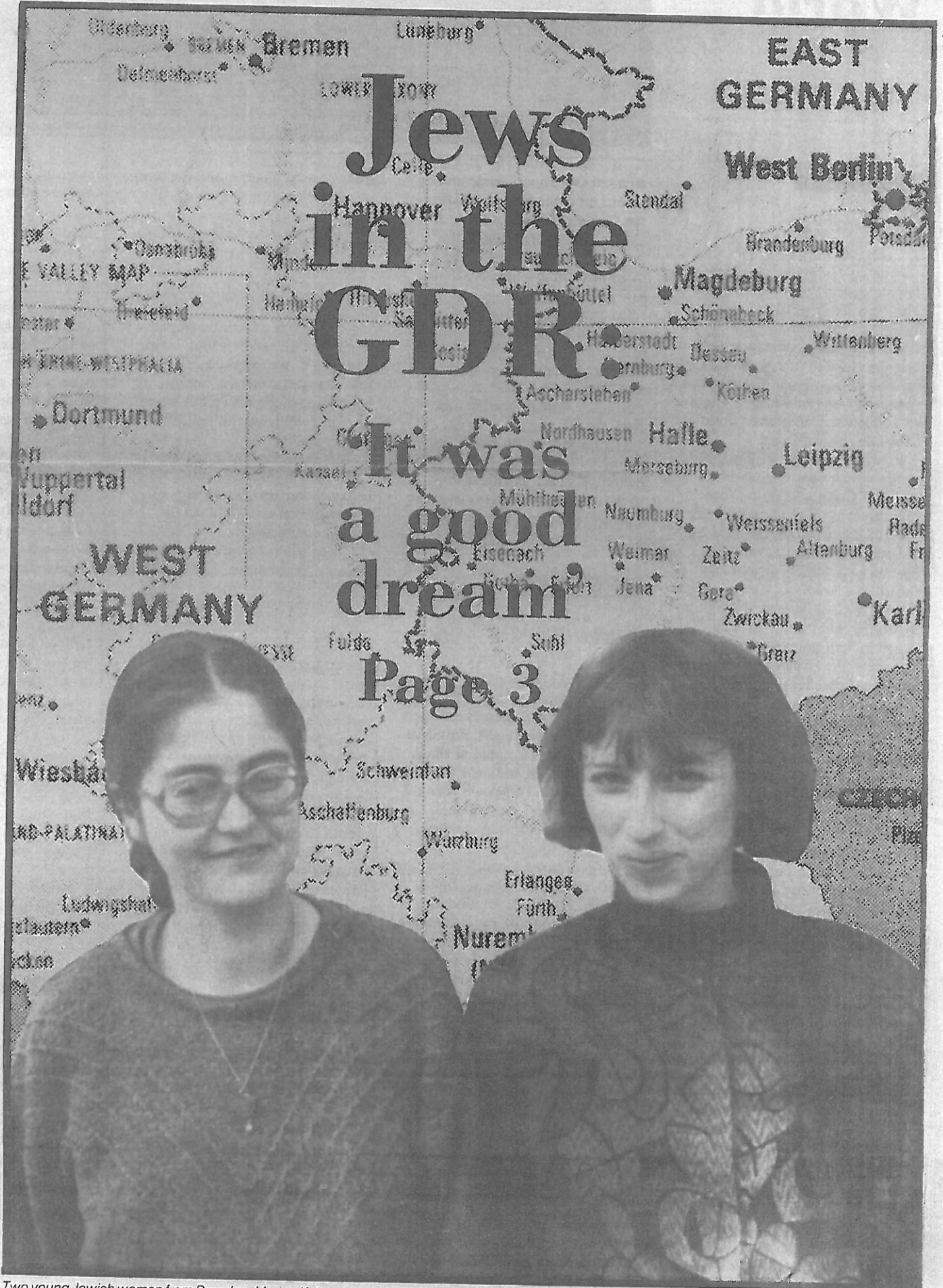
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YOSSI KLEIN HALEVI

Two young Jewish women from Dresden. Marion Kahnmann (l) and Judith Erchwege

Jews in the GDR: 'It was a good dream'

By YOSSI KLEIN HALEVI

EAST BERLIN—I first met Gerrit Kirchner at a Jewish student conference in West Berlin in November, a few weeks after the Wall opened. Kirchner, a medical student and son of the chairman of East Berlin's Jewish community, had a shaven head and wore a leather cap. Among the respectably groomed students at the conference, Kirchner was unique.

I had expected Kirchner, in those first weeks of freedom, to be enthusiastic about the revolution that had just overthrown East Germany's—the G.D.R.'s—totalitarian regime. But Kirchner didn't seem especially happy; in fact he didn't consider himself liberated at all. If anything, he seemed to feel that the Wall had brought too much freedom: he was upset that young people under the age of 16 now had free access to the temptations of West Berlin.

He had said to me then: "People in the West thought it was unbearable in the G.D.R., that it was like 1984. But they didn't know anything about our lives. Maybe I was brainwashed, but I didn't have the feeling that I was living under repression. I felt I could be an individual. In one seminar in school I said that the constitution of the G.D.R. was wrong to attack individualism. The teacher was shocked at first, but after a while said, 'Well, yes, I think you're right.'"

Kirchner spoke without stridency; he smiled while offering his disturbing ideas. He seemed prepared to consider other points of view. "Maybe I was brainwashed," he had even allowed. I felt that Kirchner was saying: These are my ideas for now, maybe they're wrong and maybe I'll change them, so there's no need for us to fight.

He continued, "I quite like it in the G.D.R. There is a lot of good in the system which I wouldn't want to see changed. The social equality, for example. And the anti-fascist policy. In West Germany, Nazi groups can function openly; but they are banned in the G.D.R."

"I was shocked when I saw policemen guarding synagogues here in West Germany. In the G.D.R. that is completely unnecessary. I feel safer when I cross the Wall back to East Berlin. We have less street crime. And we don't have fascists demonstrating in the streets."

Then Kirchner added, with regret, "But maybe now, with the opening of the Wall, we'll have those things too."

How could an individualist like Kirchner be an apologist for the G.D.R.'s conformist system? Even more puzzling was how a Jew could support a German government that had denied any responsibility for the Holocaust and refused to pay reparations to survivors; that had directed a vicious anti-Zionist campaign in its media; and that supported the most extreme Arab states and terrorist groups in their war against Israel. Kirchner had been raised in a home that respected Jewish traditions; he was one of the few young Jews in the



Gerrit Kirchner.

'I was too idealistic; I thought this society had deeper values....All these years I believed I was living in the "good Germany."'

G.D.R. with Jewish knowledge. He had told me how proud he was to publicly read the Book of Jonah in the East Berlin synagogue on Yom Kippur, in being, as he put it, "a young Jew praying in Berlin, before this community."

Didn't this young Jew feel any unease about supporting a G.D.R. which had continued, in its own way, the German war against the Jews?

Kirchner said: "The picture isn't at all black and white. For example, our community received a lot of financial support from the government. Most of the Jews living here received monthly stipends as 'victims of fascism.' My father was among them. There were many benefits for 'victims of fascism,' like traveling first class on the trains. I felt in some way privileged."

"When I was growing up, anti-fascism was very much stressed in school, and this gave me a feeling of safety. In my class everyone knew I was Jewish. I felt that the Jewish experience in World War II was downplayed by our teachers, but I had the chance to speak about it in my class. My classmates were interested. No one ever said to me, 'Kirchner, shut up, we don't want to hear about it.'"

"Even the government's anti-Zionism: I didn't like it, but I didn't feel personally attacked. My father

wrote some letters to the editor, protesting anti-Zionist cartoons. The letters weren't published—but the papers didn't publish letters from anybody." Kirchner laughed, and his laughter seemed to say: You see, even the objectionable aspects of the system weren't evil so much as absurd.

Four months later I met Kirchner in East Berlin's only synagogue. It was Purim night and about 50 people had filled the pews of a room off the main sanctuary, creating in that small space the illusion of a crowd. Kirchner no longer had a crewcut, but a thick tuft of hair brushed nearly straight up. He sat in the first row and was one of the few people in the room to actually hold a book in hand, following the cantor's reading. Most of the congregants—they seemed more like a theater audience—waited passively for Haman's name, then laughed and stamped their feet and waved noisemakers, as if that were the essence of the holiday. Kirchner smiled each time the congregation erupted, but rarely joined in; those childish antics were not for him.

Kirchner and I spoke after the reading. Much had happened since we had first met. It was amazing to think that only four months ago, East Germans were forbidden to even enter West Germany; now, they were

being absorbed into it.

"Congratulations," I said. "You are about to become a citizen of reunited Germany."

Kirchner smiled. "My friends and I have this joke: first, unification with West Germany. Then, with Austria. And then we regain the old German colonies in Africa."

I said, "It's hard to believe that the G.D.R. collapsed so quickly."

He said, "I was too idealistic; I thought this society had deeper values. Maybe Marxism itself was too idealistic. People are looking for big money; that's what really interests them. The idea of a warm society, of personal connections being more important than material goods—we've lost it."

Then he added: "I still think the ideas of socialism were good. But our leadership was corrupt, like Pinochet."

"You've changed since we last spoke, Gerrit."

"Have I? I don't know. Maybe the situation has changed."

I asked him whether he had been surprised by the recent revelations that Stasi, the state secret police, had maintained millions of files on the most intimate details of citizens' lives—in many cases continuing the surveillance methods of the Nazi police.

He said, "The stories about Stasi didn't surprise me. Everyone knew what Stasi meant. For people now to be shocked about Stasi is like Germans 50 years ago saying, 'Of course there were rumors, but we really didn't know.'"

"How do you feel now, Gerrit, about your G.D.R. identity?"

"All these years I believed I was living in the 'good Germany.' Because this was the anti-fascist Germany, I didn't feel upset about living in a German country. As a child I didn't look at policemen and think, 'These are the same police who were once wearing SS uniforms.' Had I lived in West Germany, I would have felt very differently."

"I never considered myself a German. My vision was: I live in a country where German is spoken. I didn't feel a strong German national identity in this country—but obviously it was there all along, just not visible. On the official level, German identity wasn't stressed here, and that made it easier for me. "In West Germany, they referred to themselves as 'Germany.' If the West German skiing team won, 'Germany' won. But if our team won, it was always the 'G.D.R.' We weren't 'Germany'; we were the 'G.D.R.'"

"I used to, I suppose, feel a kind of pride in the G.D.R.—maybe pride is too strong a word—but I felt good in this country. Now I have to defend myself when people have pity on me just for being born here. It's true that I can't feel pride now, when so many bad things are being revealed to the public."

"I used to think that just because Nazi parties were forbidden here was proof that this was an anti-fascist

country. But I was naive. The anti-fascism of the G.D.R. was an illusion."

Trade-offs

A few days later I met Kirchner's father, Peter Kirchner, a doctor and chairman of the East Berlin community. Dr. Kirchner's office is in an old building whose front door glass is cracked. To get a line on his phone, he has to signal the office beside his, by knocking twice on the wall.

I asked him how he had survived the war. He said: "My family was living in Berlin until 1942. Then my father, who wasn't Jewish, took me to live in a small town, and I stopped wearing the yellow star. We told people that our house in Berlin had been destroyed in an air raid."

"Colleagues of my father knew the truth, but they didn't betray us. Those people helped me to make my peace with the Germans afterwards, and to feel that it was possible for me to continue living among Germans. But now when I see the nationalist demonstrations in the G.D.R., I wonder if I made a mistake."

I asked Dr. Kirchner about his G.D.R. identity. He answered with the plural "we," as though speaking for his community, rather than for himself.

"We were proud of our G.D.R. identity," he said. "We still hold on to it, because it is necessary for us to hold on to something. We believed we were building a better Germany, where ideals and humanitarianism were more important than material values."

"Are you proud today to be a citizen of the G.D.R.?"

He smiled. "I can't say my pride in the G.D.R. is gone. But there is a slow process of changing one's mind. I don't like to be one of those who are two-faced—and there are many now—and who changed their opinions instantly. We're still attached to the G.D.R. past. I can't deny the government help I always got for the Jewish community. We had no limitation on Jewish religious life."

"My wish to become a doctor was realized here. I come from a poor, working-class family, and I don't know if I could have become a doctor elsewhere. For this, too, I feel grateful to the G.D.R. This is not to minimize the mistakes made in the economy."

"Just the economy?"

"Maybe not just the economy. Many of us who survived fascism were shocked to see the mistakes made by our leaders, who are former anti-fascists. Especially in state security."

"Don't you think they kept a file on you?"

He nodded wordlessly. Then he said: "One thing we always knew: our phone was tapped, our mail was read. We knew the community, too, was being watched. You always had a scissor in your head—what you say and what you don't—working auto-

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matically. Still, one lived with it. We felt ourselves controlled—but not threatened.

"Even though we had a very strict system, we thought it was better than in West Germany, where neo-Nazis had public meetings. Here they were forbidden. We in the community had the feeling of security. We had no experience of anti-Semitic attacks."

Freedom for security: that was the trade-off for the G.D.R.'s Jews. If they were controlled, at least the neo-Nazis were too. For Jews living in a post-war German society, it had seemed a sensible arrangement.

I asked, "Did you perhaps put too high a value on the fact that Nazis were banned in the G.D.R.? Did that in some way blind you to seeing what was wrong here?"

"Looking back, you're right. We could have coped with Nazis and anti-Semitism. We can see it elsewhere in Europe. France has the National Front, and still Jews live well; Jewish life there is better than here. If democracy is strong enough it should

be able to cope with the problem."

"How did you feel, as a Jewish leader, reading the anti-Zionist propaganda in the government press?"

"In the Jewish community we protested against certain articles and cartoons, but we didn't have the strength to have them corrected. Once, one of the papers published a cartoon of Jews with big noses—the same Nazi symbols. We met with the editor and he apologized to us, but privately, not in the paper."

"Was it hard for you to be citizens of a German state that was an enemy of Israel?"

"We sometimes thought that West Germany's very pro-Israel statements were an alibi for allowing fascist groups like the Republicans to exist. Kaddafi's gas factory comes from a West German company. There is a poem by Heine about an argument between a rabbi and a minister, about whose religion is better. In the end, both are not kosher. You can say the same today about the two Germanies."

"We used to speak about this problem of anti-Zionism. In conversations with Klaus Gysi, the secretary of state for religious affairs, we said that for Jews anti-Zionism sounds like anti-Semitism. But Gysi told us not to take it too seriously."

And so they didn't. The G.D.R.'s Jews made one additional trade-off: they ignored the anti-Zionist campaign because it wasn't directed against them. The G.D.R. protected its own Jews; only Jews outside the G.D.R. were considered legitimate targets. Almost alone in the Soviet bloc, the G.D.R. never attacked its Jewish minority, never accused it of disloyalty.

Unlike Czechoslovakia, there were no "anti-Zionist" show trials of Jewish Communists here; unlike Poland, there were no purges of "Zionists" from the government and the universities. The Jews of the G.D.R., living in a post-Holocaust German state, were protected from Communist anti-Semitism. In their appreciation, they failed to realize that the G.D.R.'s anti-Zionism, and its support for radical Arabs, was a far greater threat to Jewish survival than nostalgic SS men drinking beer in West German taverns.

I asked, "What do you wish you would have done differently as a Jewish leader in the G.D.R.?"

"It's no good to apologize afterwards. But I do wish we had more forcefully defended Jewish interests. When they compared Sabra and Shatilla with concentration camps,

when they called Israelis Nazis, we should have said: 'Germans cannot speak this way.'"

"Do you feel betrayed by the G.D.R.?"

"Even knowing that not everything was right here, I wasn't unhappy. I had my family. I had a profession I liked very much. And I also had the satisfaction of helping to keep alive the Jewish community. It was not a superficial or a 'show-off' existence. I didn't earn a big salary; I didn't care for the material life. Family, profession, the Jewish community, a new Germany: these are the things that mattered to me."

The Returnees

Gerrit Kirchner said to me: "The people I really admire are the old Jewish Communists, those who came back to the G.D.R. after the war to build a better Germany. Not so much their ideas but their passion. They had ideals and took responsibility for them. That's what being a Jew means to me."

Partly because of Kirchner's enthusiasm, I wanted to meet one of these Jewish Communists, the "returnees," as those who came back after the war were known in the

G.D.R. political myth. Thomas Simon, of the G.D.R.-U.S.A. Friendship League, gave me Werner Handler's name. Simon, a Communist, warned me: "Werner is really dogmatic. Even I disagree with him sometimes."

Handler, a retired editor and reporter for the state radio, suggested we meet at the government press center. Though he is nearly 70, and what is left of his hair has turned grey, his eyebrows and mustache remain black, as if part of him refuses to grow old. He speaks in the slow, slightly ironic voice of a man who life can no longer surprise. But his voice abruptly changes when he speaks of Communist ideology. Then, the pretense of detachment disappears and the real Werner Handler emerges: passionate, angry, absolutist, unbending. He seems the prototype of a loving but impossible uncle, Uncle Werner the Communist, who can ruin a family dinner with tirades against the "vested interests" and who the family has learned, from painful experience, how to handle: stay away from politics and Uncle Werner will be fine.

Handler began telling me his story literally from the beginning: where and when he was born, why the fami-

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Dr. Peter Kirchner, chairman of the East Berlin Jewish community, with East Berlin cantor Oljean Engster.

ly moved from one part of Silesia to the other how his mother kept a kosher home while his father ate ham on a special "treif" plate. He often interrupted his slow narrative to apologize: "I'm talking too much, aren't I."

The Holocaust turned many Jewish Communists into Zionists, convincing them of the need for a Jewish homeland; the Nazi experience turned Handler into a Communist. It happened in the Sachsenhausen concentration camp. Handler was sent to Sachsenhausen at 18, in the days immediately after Kristallnacht. "In Sachsenhausen I got my first political lesson," he said. "The Communists I met there said to me, 'Young fellow, do you have any idea why you were imprisoned now? Why do you think the fascists felt bold enough just now to run amok on Kristallnacht?'"

Handler's new Communist friends explained to him how the French and the British had sold out Czechoslovakia two months earlier in Munich, and in so doing had given Hitler carte blanche. The result was Kristallnacht. Suddenly, Handler saw the hidden pattern of history. If Handler was starving in Sachsenhausen, it was because of the capitalists and the imperialists. The German capitalists had put Hitler in power, and the Western imperialists were keeping him there. At his most forlorn time, just when the world seemed meaningless, the communists gave Handler a world view.

Handler was released from Sachsenhausen and got a visa for England. "Before I was let out of the camp, the Communists told me, 'Wherever you go, tell them what is happening here.' I could have become a Zionist and gone to Israel. But I couldn't forget the Communists in the camps. I always felt I had a responsibility to them—I was out and they were in."

In England, Handler joined the Communist Free German Youth Movement. He became known, he

says with pride, as a "troublemaker." Because of his Communist reputation, the British army refused to accept him as a volunteer. Instead, he worked for the fire department, repairing roofs during the London Blitz.

After the war, he and his wife, a Jewish girl from the Free German Youth Movement, returned to Germany. He got a job working for a radio station in Hamburg, in the western part of the country. When the Cold War began and Germany was partitioned into rival ideological states, Handler was fired from his job for being a Communist. He crossed over to East Berlin and got a job with the government radio. Handler joined the Communists—his friends who had survived the camps—in their new struggle. "We came to build a new Germany, Neue Deutschland." He beat out the syllables of that German phrase with his fist, turning it into a rhythmic chant.

I asked Handler, "How did you feel about the G.D.R.'s refusal to accept responsibility for the Holocaust and pay reparations to the survivors?"

He said, "We had a different attitude than the West Germans. The West Germans said, 'We'll pay anything,' but they kept the old Nazi police and judges. In the G.D.R., we didn't think in terms of money. We were such socialists, we didn't understand money at all. 'Money? Millions have been put to death and we're going to pay for it with money? No! Let's make instead an anti-Nazi state, a little socialist flower.' Very idealistic, I agree. But this is how we felt."

"Wasn't it ironic that this anti-Nazi Germany didn't make peace with the Jews and armed Israel's enemies?"

"In the beginning we wanted connections with Israel. But Israel didn't. When the East German state refused to collapse under economic pressure from the West, the West Germans devised the Holstein Doctrine, which

said that a country had to choose between diplomatic relations with either West Germany or the G.D.R. They were trying to diplomatically strangle us. Israel was receiving billions in West German reparations money, and they were under pressure from the Holstein Doctrine. That money was used as a cover to keep Nazis in power in West Germany. Israel preferred to take tainted money instead of supporting the stabilization of the anti-Nazi German state. This was a tragedy."

"How did you feel about the anti-Zionist campaign in the G.D.R. media, which portrayed Jews as Nazis?"

"I don't remember anything like that. I was a news editor at the radio for many years, and if that kind of thing would have come across my

desk I would have thrown it out."

"But you must have known about the government's hostility to Zionism."

"Well, the attacks on Zionism were silly."

"Did you feel uncomfortable hearing anti-Zionism from a German government?"

"The Germans had the least right to criticize Jewish nationalism; this was my attitude."

"Did you ever take that position publicly, as a journalist?"

"Oh, I don't know. But I, uh, it was difficult to counter because of the different wars of aggression that Israel fought. The 1956 war, for example. Israel had a great chance to make peace; but instead it joined with the imperialists, with England and France, and attacked Egypt."

"Did you think the Six Day War was Israeli aggression?"

"It's too difficult for me to remember. There have been so many wars."

"Were they all wars of aggression?"

"In the Yom Kippur War—that's what it's called, isn't it—Egypt attacked first, if I'm not mistaken. That was Egyptian aggression."

"But it wasn't portrayed that way in your press."

"Is that so? Then there we had a very wrong position."

But Handler had almost certainly not noticed that wrong position at the time. Just as he couldn't remember the names of Israel's wars, just as he couldn't recall a single offensive anti-Zionist statement in all his years as a

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journalist. It simply hadn't mattered enough for him to notice. Israel was not his passion; Handler lost interest in the Jewish state when it chose West Germany over the G.D.R.

For Handler, there could have been no greater crime than that. In the struggle between capitalist West Germany and communist East Germany, Handler saw an extension of World War II. For Handler, West Germany was run by the very capitalists who had placed Hitler in power and then used slave labor in the camps; the G.D.R. represented the struggle against Hitler. Tragically, the Jews had chosen the wrong—the demonic—side. And so it was not Handler who had betrayed the Jewish people but the Jews who had betrayed themselves, by spurning the G.D.R., this little socialist flower, and supporting Nazi capitalism. In that way Werner Handler, Holocaust survivor, could justify every new G.D.R. assault on Israel, could ignore a government media campaign that borrowed Nazi images of Jews and taught young Germans to see in Israel the embodiment of human evil.

I asked Handler why he thought the G.D.R. had collapsed.

He said, "Our first mistake was that we underestimated the capacity of German capitalism—which made Hitler, which made the war—to regenerate. We couldn't imagine that this system would revive. We were the underdogs against West German big business."

"But weren't there any mistakes

made in the way your government treated its people?"

"Well—We should have tried to gradually open the Wall. But would we have had a partner on the other side? If you look at how [West German Chancellor] Kohl is speaking to a Christian Democratic Polish prime minister about borders, what chance would a German Communist have, a head of state Kohl had sworn to liquidate?"

"It's very easy to talk of mistakes. The reality is we didn't have a chance, not in the West, and not in the East—where the system was, I suppose, very strict. The G.D.R. didn't have a chance to develop its own way."

"We failed to make a democratic and technologically modern society. There was no possibility for normal change. The thing had come to—" He didn't finish the sentence, unable to hear himself say that the G.D.R. had come to an end.

"One of the benefits of being a 'victim of fascism,'" said Handler, "is that you can retire at 60 instead of 65. As soon as I turned 60, I took that option and quit. I couldn't take it anymore; I had no freedom of expression in my work. The revolution was an absolute necessity." He meant the revolution of November, 1989—the anti-Communist revolution.

I asked, "If you knew that it would have ended like this, would you have come back to Germany?"

"I don't know...I could have—I don't know—I could have gone to Israel. And then what would my life look like now? I decided to come back to Germany. But you see, I had to come back. I owed it to the Communists in Sachsenhausen. How could I abandon them?"

An old man in a shapeless grey suit

and large square tinted sunglasses, a colleague of Handler's from the radio and a Party member, passed the table where we sat. Handler asked him how he was and the man replied, "So so, under the circumstances."

Handler said, "The circumstances are getting better and better."

"Is that so?"

"Yes," said Handler, the P.D.S. (the re-formed Communist Party) is picking up support."

The man smiled at Handler's optimism. Handler turned to me and said, "Not everything is lost. Oh no, not by any means. You'd be surprised how progressive young West Germans are. The trade unions there are very strong. Let there be unification. We'll build an anti-fascist Germany in the entire country!"

Handler's most beloved words—"progressive," "anti-fascist"—sounded embarrassingly dated, like slang from a long-gone cultural era.

He said, "I must have the skin of a rhinoceros. In Nazi Germany I was a Jew. In England, I was a German. In West Germany, I was Communist. And now, today, I am still a terrible Communist."

'The good Germany'

The Jewish Culture Association is located in a one-room office inside the headquarters of the P.D.S. On a handwritten sign in the lobby that gives the association's room number is a small Israeli flag, not what one expects to find in the building of the former Communist Party. The association was formed this past November by a group of young secular Jews who felt uncomfortable in the official religious Jewish community. Many of the association's 100 members are the children of

Jewish Communists, who returned to the G.D.R. after the war to build a new Germany.

I asked Cornelia Dieckmann, a professor of Russian and one of the association's leaders, why the group was housed in the P.D.S. building.

She said, "It just worked out that way. My understanding is that [P.D.S. Chairman] Gysi arranged for us to get this office for free. But we're not aligned with any political group. We're open to people with all ideas."

Technically, Dieckmann was right: the association is independent. One of the association's leaders, Irene Runge, was in fact running as a candidate on the list formed by former anti-government dissidents, "Alliance 90." But nearly every member of the association with whom I spoke was a supporter of the P.D.S.; Dieckmann herself belonged to the Party. One member told me that the association had participated in the annual government-organized demonstration in memory of the German Jewish Communist, Rosa Luxemburg. A young man in the office said to me with a wry smile, "I'm the only moderate here." Clearly, members of the association didn't feel uncomfortable sitting in the headquarters of the P.D.S.

For young Jews like Dieckmann, raised by Communist parents who were fervent believers in the "anti-fascist" Germany, the P.D.S. was all they had left to hold on to of a vanishing G.D.R. identity.

Dieckmann said, "I always felt that I was a German and a Communist, that I was living in the good Germany. We saw a lot of mistakes here, but we excused them. Even the Wall. I lived 200 meters from it. My parents told me when I was growing

up, 'This wall is protecting us.' And I believed it.

"The G.D.R. was a good dream. I still believe that the ideas of Marx and Lenin, the main ideas, are beautiful. It is very difficult for me as a Jew to think that I will be living in a Germany that is not socialist and anti-fascist."

"Do you still think you were living in the good Germany?"

"No. Not after all the revelations and scandals. For me one of the worst things we heard was that the G.D.R. had trained Arab terrorists. At first I really just couldn't believe it. It's still unbelievable to me."

Yet was that really so surprising? Wasn't it entirely consistent with the G.D.R.'s anti-Zionist campaign, with its total backing for the Palestinian cause? But, for Dieckmann, the G.D.R.'s support for Palestinian terrorists had undermined whatever faith she still had in the G.D.R. If anything gave the lie to a repentant anti-fascist Germany, it was the idea that German weapons and training were once again being used to kill Jews.

On a wall outside the association's office is a poster of Karl Marx wearing a button that said, "Why Worry, Take Gysi." It seemed a natural movement from Marx to Gysi, from the German Jewish founder of communism to the last defender of communism in Germany, himself of Jewish origin. For a moment, looking at that poster, one could imagine communism as a hospitable, even natural, home for Jews. But not even the Jews who remained in this building really believed that anymore. □

This is the third part of a three-part series.

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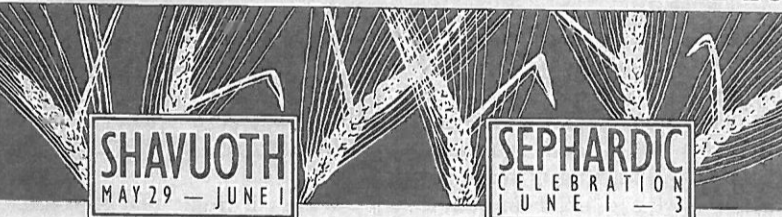
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