Young German Jews: A fragile sense of place

By YOSSI KLEIN HALEVI

BERLIN—There is no sign on Number 13 Joachimstaler Strasse to indicate what lies behind the white door. One enters into a narrow hall, monitored by a TV camera and two guards in a glass-encased office. The hall leads to an enclosed courtyard, across which is another building, also unmarked, a double anonymity.

GERMAN INFORMATION CENTER LEHNARTZ

I came to Berlin expecting to find some young Jew who would tell me: The night the Wall was opened, I felt, for the first time, something positive about this country. That...it wasn't a tragic mistake for my parents to have entrusted me to this place...that it wasn't self deception, or a betrayal of the past for me to plan my future here.

Here, in this second building, is the community center for West Berlin's Jewish youth. The building appears more suited for an opera house: vast ceilings with gold-painted moldings, ornate banisters, wide marble steps. While the building itself is an architectural celebration of Germanness, the exhibit on the walls—photographs of Berlin synagogues burning on Kristallnacht--seems a taunt at German culture. The message of the exhibit is clear: We who inhabit this building are not at home in it.

In the lounge, beneath a photograph of Theodor Herzl, three young men sit around a table. They are wearing their coats, though none of them seems to be going anywhere. I take a seat at the table. When I mention I am from Israel, the young men are instantly welcoming and speak to me in Hebrew. A middle-aged woman, a former Israeli who is one of the directors of the youth center, passes us and smiles. "It's good to hear Hebrew spoken here," she says.

I tell the young men I have come to learn what Jews in Germany think about the opening of the Berlin Wall. Daniel, a chemistry student, says: "I don't care if there's a wall or not a wall. They had a big party for a week, and now they're all talking about Greater Germany. The nationalism from before the war is coming back. If something is good for Germany, I don't want it."

"I don't think any Jew living here was happy when the Wall opened," says Menachem, an economics student.

"No," says Raul, a fashion designer, "I was glad for them. But the problem is, can they accomplish something without going crazy? The first week the Wall was opened, I went there every day. I heard what the East Germans coming over were saying: 'Now that we're here, you can get rid of the Turks.' "

"What's the difference between you and the Turks?" Menachem says to Raul. "You also have black hair."

Raul laughs.

Menachem says: "Next time it won't go against Jews but foreigners—those who don't look German."

Daniel says: "I'm not afraid now."

"But I'm afraid of what can come," says Menachem.

Raul: "It doesn't matter who they're against, it always has to be someone. Now it's the Turks."

Menachem: "Not long ago I was walking on the Ku'damm and I found myself in a crowd of soccer fans. Some of them were shouting, 'Germany for the Germans, aliens out!' I saw some Turks bleeding on the street. I turned about-face and immediately left. Because of my dark skin and hair I was afraid they would mistake me for a Turk."

Daniel: "I never personally experienced anti-Semitism. But at soccer matches, when the referee does something the crowd doesn't like, people shout at him, 'Jew, Jew.' "

Menachem: "I'm watching the situation very carefully. You never know what they can do: throw us out, or worse. In 10 years there won't be anything for a Jew to do here."

Daniel: "I plan to do my doctorate in the U.S. But maybe I'll stay in Berlin. It's easy for me here. I have family, friends, material comforts. But I don't have a good feeling being here. My inner life isn't normal."

Spoilers at the Wedding

I came to Berlin expecting to find some young Jew who would tell me: The night the Wall was opened, I felt, for the first time, something positive about this country. That night I suddenly realized it wasn't a tragic mistake for my parents to have entrusted me to this place, that it wasn't self-deception, or a betrayal of the past, for me to plan my future here.

But in conversations with young Jews from across Germany, I repeatedly heard the opposite: that the opening of the Wall, and with it the prospect of German reunification, had only confirmed their alienation from this society. While Germans celebrated, they worried for the future, like spoilers at a wedding.

Before the war, many German Jews preferred to call themselves "Germans of the Mosaic persuasion." They offered their Jewishness as an afterthought, an apology. Today, as though to mock the trusting patriotism of the old German Jews, young Jews here refuse to call themselves Germans at all. There are no German Jews, they will say, only Jews in Germany. When they refer in conversation to "Germans," they mean non-Jews. Like the haredim, ultra-Orthodox Jews, they insist they can never become part of the society around them. Nowhere else in the West will one meet young secular Jews who are so convinced of the inevitability of Jewish ghettoization.

When asked whether they suffer from anti-Semitism, they will mention one, perhaps two personal experiences. A Jewish dental student from Munich told me that when his school scheduled an exam on Yom Kippur, and he asked an administrator for a postponement, he was told, "Your people can fight a war on Yom Kippur, so why can't you take an exam?" Another student from Munich told me of a high school classmate who placed a cigarette lighter under his nose and told him to inhale the gas.

Pressed, young Jews will admit those experiences are exceptional. Still, what might be merely a cruel remark elsewhere becomes, in Germany, an unbearable trauma. So fragile is the Jewish sense of place here that a single ugly incident can outweigh years of positive interaction with German non-Jews.

In fact, the lives of these young Jews offer the best evidence against their own fears, proof that Germany has indeed changed. They speak German among themselves, were raised not in Jewish but German schools, and are by all visible standards successfully integrated here. The young Jews I spoke with acknowledged having German friends: some said at least half their friends weren't Jewish. They have achieved an acceptance here which German Jews once only dreamed of, and yet they deny its reality, or else insist on its transience. It is as if, feeling guilty for their German success, they must subvert it with fear; as if, to be loyal to Jewish history, they must transform themselves into spiritual refugees.

Young Jews imagining a dark German future told me how they won't be taken unawares again: unlike the German Jews of the past, they will know to escape in time. They pride themselves on their alertness, their ability to learn from history. And yet— except for an infrequent Arab or neo-Nazi terrorist attack—the 30,000 Jews living here aren't important enough to become a target. They are not a continuation of the past but a footnote.

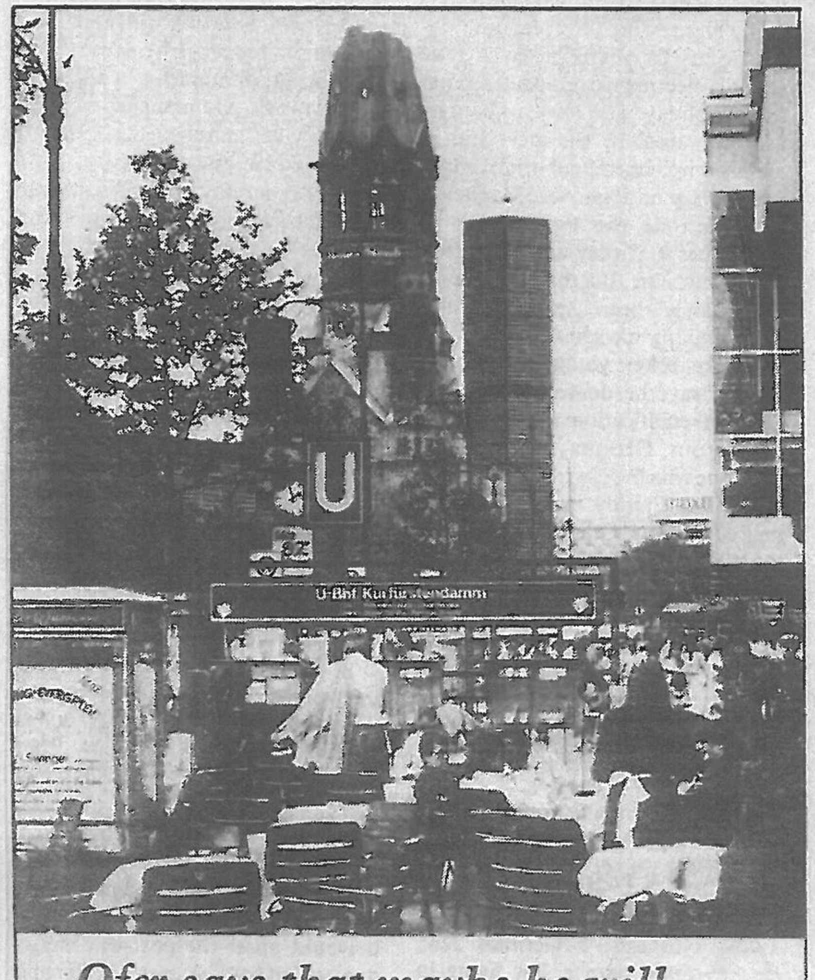
One senses that most of the Jews know this. "The far right has other concerns," a Berlin Jewish student admitted to me. "There are 10,000 Jews in Berlin and 400,000 Turks. I've heard Germans say that what the Jews were in the past, the Turks will be in the future."

At a recent Jewish student conference held in Berlin, a session was devoted to the rise of the Republicans, the German far-right party. The students discussed the Republican threat to democracy and to the country's Turkish "guest-workers"—but no one mentioned a threat to Jews. Finally, the moderator of the session, a Jewish professor active in the Green Party, said, "People, this is incredible. We've been discussing rightwing extremism for over an hour, and not one of you has said you feel personally threatened as a Jew. I think we have to ask ourselves: How serious are our fears?"

A Double Burden

What young Jews in Germany call fear for the future is really the wound of the past. Like children of Holocaust survivors elsewhere, they have inherited their parents' traumas. But they carry an extra burden which was not imposed on the "second generation" in other countries. Young Jews here receive a double message from their parents: become successful in the society where we've raised you, master its culture, but mistrust and even despise it. And so they build their lives here, even as they imagine other, more intact lives elsewhere.

Ofer Frydling is the chairman of the Berlin Union of Jewish Students. He is tall and broad-shouldered, sufficiently masculine to carry his soft, sweet face as an asset. Ofer seems older than his 22 years, not because of his appearance but his bearing: he has the self-confidence of someone who



Ofer says that maybe he will leave, and then again, maybe he won't. 'Ninety-nine percent of us want to leave, and ninety-nine percent of us stay.'

has resolved his questions of identity and has decided to simply accept himself as he is.

Ofer's life is given over to Jewish activism. He wears a beeper, like a doctor, in case he is needed for a Jewish emergency. "I'm so busy with this work that I sleep only a few hours a night," he says. "But so what. I'll slow down after my first heart attack."

One can easily imagine Ofer as a future leader of the German Jewish community. One afternoon, Ofer took a group of visiting Jewish students from Estonia to the kosher restaurant in the Jewish community center. The waiter asked Ofer to sign for the meal and then, laughing, told the Estonians, "Ofer is like your Gorbachev. He comes in here and can sign for anything. Just like Gorbachev can get whatever he wants in Russia—the same with Ofer here."

Ofer was born in Israel. His father, a Polish Jew living in Germany, met Ofer's mother on a visit to Israel. She agreed to return with him to Germany, but under one condition: that their future child be born in Israel.

Though only an infant when he was brought to Germany, Ofer considers himself an Israeli. "I don't feel at home anywhere but in Israel," he says. Unlike many young Jews here who offer their Hebrew names only to visiting Jews from abroad, Ofer is always "Ofer."

In insisting that Ofer be born in Israel, his mother gave him the psychological security of a non-German identity. One senses that Ofer's poise and self-confidence come at least in part from being an Israeli. For unlike other young Jews here, Ofer is, however remotely, rooted elsewhere.

I ask Ofer how he feels about the opening of the Berlin Wall. "It was exciting to be here when it happened," he says. "But I don't want the Wall to come down. I want the Germans to know what a wall, a ghetto, feels like."

Despite his alienation here, Ofer says he remains in Germany because he has a mission. "I feel I'm doing something important for the Jewish people." But then he says, without intending any contradiction, simply stating another fact: "I don't leave because it's comfortable for me here." Ofer says that maybe he will leave, and then again, maybe he won't. "Ninety-nine percent of us want to leave," he says. "And ninety-nine percent of us stay."

A Failed Assimilation

Whereas most young Jews here were raised to feel different, even alienated, Reuven Gambit's parents tried to make him into a German. Tall and blond-haired and blue-eyed, with a cleft chin, Reuven looks as though he has stepped from a World War II propaganda poster of the ideal German soldier.

Reuven's parents met on the autobahn: his father was hitching and his mother was in the car that picked him up. In that same casual way they sought to create a life together, unburdened by history. They had no interest in Judaism, and expected the same of their son. Reuven was given no Jewish education; he didn't take off school on Yom Kippur. None of his friends or teachers even knew he was a Jew. When he brought friends to his home there was nothing there to mark his family as different from any other.

He says: "Outwardly I was the same as the others, but I never felt the same. Because I didn't look Jewish, I heard a lot of anti-Semitism from kids who just assumed I was German. You know, about Jews being rich, and how Jews and Turks are all the same."

At 18, Reuven decided to leave home. "My parents raised me with a strong sense of values. When I looked around at the moral void of German society, I wondered how I could ever leave my parents' home and enter that world. I felt that if I didn't find some identity to hold on to, I would drown."

Reuven decided to go to Israel, and ended up in a Jerusalem yeshiva for young penitents. He spent several months studying Judaism, and resolved to become a religious Jew. But when he returned to Germany, he found it nearly impossible to maintain the rituals. "I was living in Heidelberg. There was no Jewish life there, no Jewish discussions. Judaism slowly slipped away from me. I want to be more Jewish than I am now. But in Germany it can't be done."

Partly because he wants to live as a Jew, and partly because he doesn't want to live as a German, Reuven will soon be emigrating. Others here only talk about it; but Reuven, as soon as he completes his degree in economics, will move to Israel, to join the army. Afterwards, he plans to go to New York, to become an artist.

Germany, Reuven says, is a place of empty materialism. Other western countries, he concedes, are also materialistic. But here it is worse, he says, because this was once a country of culture. Its materialism, then, is not mindless but self-conscious, cynical.

He says: "Now, with reunification, Germany will get stronger, and be left with even less culture. People will fill their lives with materialism and also with nationalism. They'll find an empty way to be German.

"There is no future here. Not for Germans, and certainly not for Jews. Germany is dead—dead and damned."

Pariahs

Few of the young Jews I've met would admit to anger against their parents for settling here. Instead, they were understanding, even protective of their parents, as are children of Holocaust survivors elsewhere. Perhaps even more so here: their parents were once considered almost pariahs by world Jewry, betrayers of the past who had come to make their fortune among the murderers.

The antipathy to survivors living in Germany was an injustice. For just as no one may judge the Jews who didn't physically resist the Nazis, so no one may judge those broken survivors who tried to rebuild their lives wherever they could.

Most Jews who settled in post-war Germany were Polish survivors. While some came to Germany after disappointment in Israel, others found themselves in displaced persons camps here and simply remained. For years they reassured themselves and their children that their lives in Germany were only temporary— living on packed suitcases, as the Jewish expression here goes. One Jewish student from Munich told me that his parents were offered visas to the U.S., provided they left behind a blind aunt. The survivor family decided to keep together. They continued to hope for entry to the States, until gradually the routine of their lives became fixed.

When Freddy Brawer's Polish-

continued on next page

The Passing of the Torch

Liquor King to Peninsula Wines & Liquor

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Fragile

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born parents settled here after the war, the presence of American troops helped them feel they were living not in sovereign Germany but almost in a territorial extension of the United States. "The American soldiers were a guarantee for my parents, a basis for their lives here," says Freddy, a law student from Frankfurt. Even after the Allied occupation ended, the continued presence of NATO-affiliated American troops made it bearable for Freddy's parents to remain. It was as if the Americans were here not only to protect the Germans from the Soviets, but the Jews from the Germans.

Freddy is one of those young people in whom one immediately sees the father, as though his face didn't belong to himself. It is the sad, gentle face of someone who has endured a terrible loss but doesn't want to burden others with his pain. When Freddy smiles it seems an obligation, for even then his sadness doesn't leave him: he seems to be cheering others, rather than sharing in any delight.

When Freddy heard the news that the Berlin Wall had opened, his first thought was: Hitler won the war. The Jews are dead, only their ruins are left here, but Germany will reunite and become again a superpower.

Then another irony hit him: the Wall had been opened on November 9, the anniversary of Kristallnacht, Nazi Germany's first physical assault on the Jews. "For me, World War II began on Kristallnacht," he says. "And it ended with the opening of the Wall."

If anything symbolized the dissonance of being a Jew in Germany, it was this: in the morning of November 9 Jews commemorated Kristallnacht and mourned the past, while at night Germans drank to their future, atop the Berlin Wall.

"The Wall symbolized Europe's victory over the Germans," Freddy says. "But for Europe the war is now over. I think the Jews will be the only ones to remind the Germans of the past. No one else will continue to mourn, not the Poles, not the Russians. And that will cause more anti-Semitism here."

And yet, despite his fears, Freddy admits a certain ambivalence. "The truth is, when they opened the Wall I also felt something positive. Not pride as a German, of course, but I was pleased for them: finally, they're doing something right."

Freddy even wonders whether there is more than irony in the coinciding anniversaries of Kristallnacht and the opening of the Wall; whether the two events, taken together, can help heal Germany. He says: "What happened on November 9, 1938 was that Germany excluded one group of its citizens, the Jews. Fifty one years later, on November 9, 1989, another group of Germans—the East Germans—were brought back into Germany and restored to freedom.

"Some Germans now say we should celebrate November 9 as a national holiday. The Jews, of course, are very upset by the idea. But in Judaism we remember both freedom and slavery on Passover. Maybe we can combine the two events of November 9, if they are given their proper meaning. But that has to come from people's hearts, not from politicians making speeches."

Unlike other young Jews here, Freddy says he doesn't really fear German reunification. A thriving and prosperous Germany will benefit everyone who lives here, including the Jews. But Freddy is afraid that a unified Germany may withdraw from the West and become neutral, turning inward and dangerously parochial.

He says: "If Germany becomes neutral, I will leave. But I want to stay; I feel comfortable here. I'm even glad when the German national soccer team wins. My vision is that we will have a United States of Europe, and Germany will be a part of it. Then I will be a citizen of Europe who happens to live in Germany."

A Miracle

Alex Schwarz is a miracle of synthesis: a German Jew, rather than a Jew living in Germany. Unlike his fellow activists in the Berlin Union of Jewish Students, Alex sees no conflict between his Jewish identity and his German home. When asked about growing up in Berlin, he says simply: "It was a normal childhood." No torment, no fear, no fantasizing about the war crimes of his classmates' parents. Just as if he had grown up in an ordinary place.

He says: "I didn't experience any real anti-Semitism. I heard some Jewish jokes, but it wasn't serious. If you're a little different, children make jokes. I grew up with non-Jews; I had non-Jewish girlfriends."

Alex, 26, is completing a doctorate in chemistry. He manages to be at once low-key and engaging, speaking softly and smiling easily.

Alex's parents were Romanian-born Jews who moved to Israel after the war but couldn't adjust there: Israel was Asia, and they were Europeans. The home they made in Berlin was culturally Jewish but not a fortress. Unlike other Holocaust survivors here, they even had German friends.

Their example helped Alex find his way as a Jew in Germany. He says: "I feel integrated in this society. It is open, democratic, prosperous. I don't find Germans to be extremists anymore. They're more pragmatic. I trust young Germans. I'm convinced they are healed of extreme nationalism. When the Wall was opened, Germans celebrated in a natural way. They were simply saying 'We're one people,' just as any other people would. It was normal national pride."

Alex says he is worried about German reunification not because of any threat of renewed German militarism or economic domination but because it would upset the post-war status quo, which has kept peace in Europe for 40 years. "But reunification can be good for German society," he says. "East Germany can help make West Germany more human. They're more relaxed, less materialistic than we are."

Alex pauses, then laughs. "Well, yes, 'we.' I am a German—a German Jew, or a Jewish German."

Alex himself felt no national pride when the Wall opened, simply joy in the collapse of tyranny. He has little sympathy for his Jewish friends who refused to join the celebrations. If other Jews have been so wounded by the past that they couldn't even rejoice in a victory for freedom, one had to wonder whether Jews would ever be at peace in Germany.

He says: "I don't think it was fear of German reunification that kept Jews from joining the celebration. They just didn't feel it was their country; it didn't have anything to do with them. They are like foreigners in this city. They live in a ghetto."

"Alex," I say to him, "you are the first Jew I've met who feels at home here."

Alex laughs. "But I'm leaving."

"What do you mean you're leaving?"

"I'm going to Israel. I don't want to take the chance that my children will become like the other Jews here. I don't want them growing up with schizophrenia, living in one country but in two worlds. I want them to be healthy."

Alex knows the odds of raising intact Jewish children here; he knows how difficult it would be to duplicate himself. For Alex, there is nothing dishonorable about a Jew living in today's democratic Germany. And yet, more than his alienated Jewish friends, it is Alex who raises the question: Should anyone live in and prosper from a country whose triumphs bring him anxiety instead of joy? ☐

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