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ONE DOLLAR



LANDESBILDSTELLE BERLIN

TEAR DOWN THE WALLS

Many of the walls that have to be breached in Berlin are not made of concrete and steel. Page 16

Jews and Germans: Moving towards normalization?

By YOSSI KLEIN HALEVI

BERLIN—When the wall that divides this city was breached on November 9, the wall that separated me from Germany was opened too. For the first time, I felt a shared joy with the Germans. They had finally done something admirable as a mass, a nation. Germany had now produced not only decent individuals, which it managed to do even in its worst times, but decent crowds. The young Germans dancing on the Wall, celebrating the defeat of the world's most blatant despotic symbol, seemed a reparation for the crowds that once filled Berlin's streets, celebrating the triumph of evil.

Perhaps I was so moved by the opening of the Wall because, like most Jews, I saw Germany as a permanent wound, and positive change there seemed remote. That even Germany could morally evolve was for me a confirmation of religious faith. The great religious struggle of my generation of Jews born after the Holocaust is not over the goodness of God but of humanity: whether humanity evolves spiritually or remains static, incapable of movement. Implicit in every major religious and political conflict within the Jewish people today is this struggle between the pessimists and the optimists over human nature. Hitler and Stalin ended European Jewry's universalist dreams—humanism in the West, revolution in the East. Since then, Jews have wondered if they will ever find their place within a benign humanity, or whether, as the fundamentalist Orthodox insist, they are fated to be almost a species apart. If among my generation there has been a return movement of secular Jews to fundamentalist Orthodoxy, it is at least partly because Germany poisoned our faith in modernity, in human progress.

By overcoming the Berlin Wall, the Germans have helped prove that there are no permanent blocks, that despite everything, the inner logic of history is spiritual progress. I see it as no coincidence that the first real opening for German normalization and the liberation of Eastern Europe have occurred on the 50th anniversary of the Second World War. Fifty years, after all, is a biblical Jubilee, a time of release from bondage.

If Europe is being freed from World War II, the Jews, too, should share in that liberation. Perhaps we need to be liberated from an identity of victimization, and realize that the last four decades of Jewish reconstruction have succeeded. Perhaps the Jews can now approach Europe, even Germany, as equals, with neither the feelings of superiority or inferiority that come with the role of moral claimant. Implicit in the changes happening in Europe is a challenge to Jews to grow too, to open ourselves to new possibilities and relationships, however painful.

I came to Berlin without illusions.

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GERMAN INFORMATION CENTER: LEHNARTZ

By overcoming the Berlin Wall, the Germans have helped prove that there are no permanent blocks, that despite everything, the inner logic of history is spiritual progress.

I knew that West Germany's economic miracle had been more impressive than its moral or spiritual rebirth. It is true that a new generation of Germans had come to power. But right-wing extremism was on the rise again; Turks and other foreigners were not welcome. Nor had shame completely silenced anti-Semitism. A friend who knew Berlin warned me against wearing my yarmulka on the streets, saying, "Don't tempt Providence." I followed that advice, but wondered what it said about Germany if even now a Jew was not entirely secure on the streets of Berlin.

Still, the opening of the Wall had given me an experience, however vicariously, of shared humanity with Germans. For the first time, I felt I could speak to Germans about the future before the past. I didn't come to Berlin with expectations of emotional breakthroughs; I trust those as little as the hostility that precedes them. But I hoped for friendly encounters with young Germans who, like myself, must live with the consequences of an event they didn't create.

Few of my meetings with Germans have been free of the awkwardness of history. Some begin with an avoidance of eye contact; even small talk becomes halting, as though we were searching for words to express difficult ideas. One man to whom I was introduced tried to rise from his chair and nearly toppled over. On the subway, I asked a young man carrying a cello for directions. We talked a bit, he asked me where I was from and I said Israel. "That's great!" he said,

with an enthusiasm even an Israeli patriot would find difficult to manage.

By his very presence in Berlin, a Jew can be made to feel like an accuser, even if that is not his intent. One young Jew who lives here told me a story about an interfaith conference he attended. Throughout the meeting, he noticed a woman staring at him. Afterwards, she approached him, and they had a brief, innocuous conversation. Then, with obvious relief, she said, "Meeting a Jew is like meeting someone handicapped. It's so hard to know how to act."

A young pastor, a good man who has campaigned to place Holocaust memorials around Berlin, took me to see the mansion where the Final Solution was planned. Until recently, that mansion—located in the Berlin suburb of Wannsee—had been used as a youth club; now, partly because of the pressure of men like the pastor, it is being turned into a museum. We entered a high-ceilinged room with a marble floor and winding staircase where the Nazi leaders had met in what became known as the Wannsee Conference. For a while we stood together quietly. But the pastor found the silence uncomfortable, as though it demanded of him some verbal atonement. He cleared his throat and said, "Here is where those terrible deeds were given form." The silence returned, and he said, "Those very sad events..."

His words were unnecessary; I knew he was as appalled as I was by what had happened in that room. Still, it is difficult for even the most

well-intentioned Germans and Jews to share in silent mourning.

Reparations and Normalization

Since the Holocaust, Germans have realized that the normalization of their national identity depends in large part on healing their relationship with the Jews. That was the motive for West Germany's massive reparations payments to survivors and to Israel. West Germany has sought to compensate in other ways. It has pampered its tiny Jewish community of 30,000 with government grants and renovated buildings for synagogues and community centers. West German leaders continue to make the appropriate appearances on the appropriate anniversaries—even if they sometimes treat the Holocaust with what seems like a formal and empty reverence.

Most important, West Germany has remained a more or less trustworthy ally of Israel. When, for example, the intifada began and world opinion turned against Israel, the Bundestag was the only parliament in the world to conduct a largely sympathetic debate on the security dilemmas of the Jewish state.

Some Germans have attempted to make their peace with the Holocaust in less benign ways: by denying its uniqueness, retroactively normalizing the German past. A few years ago, the so-called historians' debate was fought here between those scholars who insisted on the Holocaust's uniqueness and those who claimed that Hitler's crimes were no more

severe than, and were in fact a defense against, the Asian barbarism of Stalin.

The consequences of that academic debate can be felt on the popular level today. One middle-aged man, a former member of the West German secret service, told me, "Compared to Stalin, Hitler's crimes were kindergarten." He seemed a decent, if pessimistic man. I don't believe he was anti-Semitic; or else, his antipathy toward Jews was no more specific than his cynicism toward human beings generally, including Germans. However offensive his statement was, it was simply his way of normalizing his relationship with Jews.

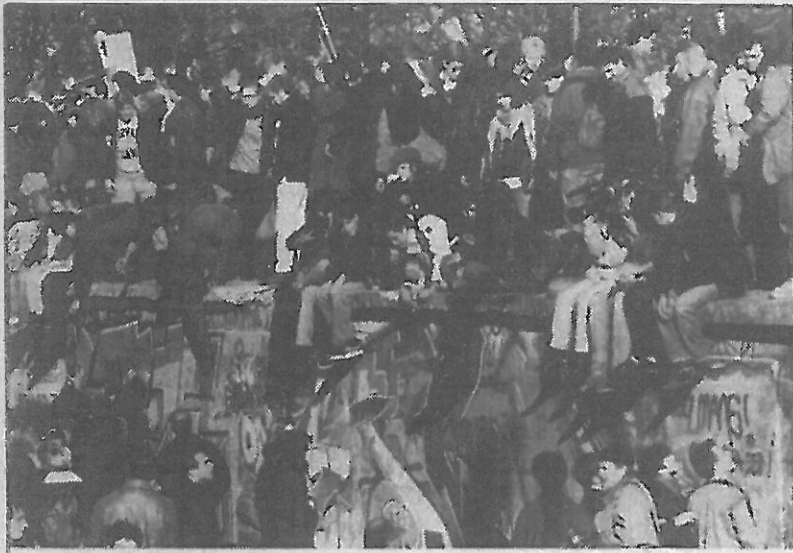
Especially now, when the breaching of the Berlin Wall has given Germans a legitimate reason for national pride, the temptation exists to somehow dispense with the Holocaust. Can German pride coexist with the knowledge that Germany is responsible for history's most premeditated and therefore greatest mass crime?

I glimpsed that dilemma of German pride in the Berlin suburb of Wannsee. On a lake, not far from the mansion where the Wannsee Conference was held, I saw a rowboat flying a large German flag. I wondered what self-willed amnesia was required to flaunt that flag in this place, and whether German national pride could really be benign if it included Wannsee in its borders.

And yet, I felt too the void that is left in young Germans by the denial of national pride. One evening, I went to a Protestant youth club, Meerbaum House, named for a German Jew killed by the Nazis. A poster on the wall announced a trip to Poland, to help clean the sites of former concentration camps. Other posters supported various liberal and fringe radical causes, from anti-apartheid and Amnesty International to the Sandinistas. One felt that the dead Jew Meerbaum was the invisible, dominant presence of this place; that the young people here were offering their notion of altruistic politics to his memory.

I met with a dozen teenagers in the club, and asked them whether they felt pride in being German. My question caused laughter. Meerbaum had his revenge: not a single person in the room would admit to German pride. "Did anyone," I asked, "feel national pride when the Wall was opened?" Blank stares. The closest concession to enthusiasm came from a girl who said, "I was happy for the people in the East."

These young people spoke German; before their meeting, they had waltzed to ballroom music, a spoof perhaps, but a German one. Yet in their relationship to a German political identity they were aliens, the emotional equivalent of this country's guest workers. I wanted to shake these young people slumped on old couches and armchairs: I, a Jew, felt



GERMAN INFORMATION CENTER: LEHNAERTZ

The young Germans dancing on the Wall...seemed a reparation for the crowds that once filled Berlin's streets, celebrating the triumph of evil.

joy for Germany when the Wall was breached. Your country has done something admirable, hopeful! What good will come of your alienation except extremist politics, however decently motivated, and more German nihilism?

There is something unnatural in demanding of Germans a permanent suspension of national pride, even at a time when they have earned it. This point was made most convincingly for me by young Jews living in Germany. At a conference of Jewish students held recently in Berlin, there was a group discussion on German nationalism. None of the Jewish students admitted any emotional connection with Germany, not even when the Wall was opened. In fact, none identified themselves as Germans at all, but as Jews in Germany. And yet, they willingly conceded the right of Germans to national pride. As one of the students said, "If we feel pride in Israel's accomplishments, why can't Germans feel pride in German accomplishments?"

The only dissenting voice in the room was that of a non-Jewish German, an observer at the conference from the Protestant youth movement, who said, "I can feel pride in my soccer team, I can even feel pride in Berlin. But what do I need national pride for? What good is it for anyone?" The debate between the Jewish students and the Protestant youth leader was an ironic reversal of the pre-Holocaust era, when it was European Jews who were most likely to favor a vague international identity. Having experienced in the Holocaust the consequences of rootlessness, and then national exultation in the triumphs of Israel, Jews could now more easily empathize with the human need for national pride, perhaps even German national pride.

The Effect of Israel

More than any other factor, the creation of Israel led to whatever normalized rela-

tions exist today between the Jewish people and Germany. The great divide between Germans and Jews was power; but once Israel acquired power, and even sought cooperation with the West German army and police and secret service, the eventual normalization of German-Jewish relations was assured.

And yet it is precisely the consequences of Jewish power that create awkwardness for an Israeli in Germany today. I met a young woman with moderate liberal sympathies. When I mentioned I was an Israeli, she told me she had heard on the news that some Israelis were upset because the heart of a Jewish soldier killed in Gaza had been transplanted into an Arab. The woman wasn't accusing me; the news seemed to sadden her. But by invoking an incident of Jewish racism just as soon as we had met, she was, however unconsciously, setting the ground rules: I am a German and you are a Jew, but now we can deal with each other as moral equals.

Encounters between Germans and Jews weren't supposed to begin this way, with talk of Jewish moral lapses. Some meetings I've had here have been even more disorienting: the German becomes the visionary, urging peace and brotherhood on the reluctant Jew. As one young man said to me, "Look at the changes happening here. People have to learn to live together. Why can't Israel and the Arabs make peace?" Because he spoke with sincerity, and with a certain concern for Israel's future, I didn't say what I was thinking: that after two world wars and a Holocaust and a superpower nuclear arms race conducted on their soil, it is good that the Germans finally want peace. But Israel faces dangers that won't go away by wishful goodwill; perhaps the problem is that the Middle East has not yet exhausted itself in carnage as has Europe.

Still, it was a humbling experience to find myself, a Jew from Jerusalem, on the moral defensive in Berlin. Un-

til recently, I naturally thought of Jerusalem as the city of light, and Berlin, headquarters of the Final Solution, as the city of darkness. Jerusalem was to be the messianic place of ingathering, drawing humanity to peace, while divided Berlin warned of nuclear apocalypse. And yet today people's minds are drawn toward Berlin—many, it is true, with anxieties of German reunification, but many others with wonder. I believe that Jerusalem will some day fulfill its promise. But the painful irony for Jews is that it is Berlin, and not Jerusalem, which now seems to offer the hope of peace.

Leftwing Encounters

World War II taught Germans and Jews opposite lessons. The victimizers were chastened by the futility of power, while the victims were finally taught its necessity. For many young Germans, the very idea of an army is a suicidal human impulse; while young Israelis see their army as an expression of the Jewish will to live.

At least partly because of these opposite perceptions, relations between the German left and Israel have been painful. The left here has often been more sensitive toward the Jewish past than toward the Jewish present. An extreme instance of leftwing hostility to Jews occurred during the 1976

Entebbe hijacking, when one of the hijackers, a German radical, mimicked a Nazi selection by separating Jewish from non-Jewish passengers: the non-Jews were freed, the Jews held as hostages.

In the late 70s, leftists began arguing that they as Germans had a special responsibility to the Palestinians: had there not been a Holocaust, a Jewish state might not have been created, and the Palestinians dispossessed. There was something perverse about Germans using the Holocaust as a motive to support the Palestinian political cause—in effect the PLO, whose constitution called for the destruction of Israel, the state of the survivors. In referring to Palestinians as the victims of the victims, German leftists magnified the insult, implying a symmetry of cruelty between what Germans had done to Jews and what Jews had done to Palestinians.

By condemning Israel without squeamishness, and usurping moral authority from the Jews, German leftists could prove their total severance from the past. After all, their parents had guiltily supported Israel as an atonement for Nazism; but they, radical altruists, had no need to atone at all.

That some German leftists were using antipathy to Israel as a way of escaping the burden of the past was demonstrated by the Green Party in

1984. During a fact-finding mission to Israel whose real purpose was solidarity with the Palestinians, Green leaders refused at first to visit Yad Vashem, Jerusalem's Holocaust memorial. Though they quickly changed their itinerary after outraged Israeli protests, they made their point: unlike those Germans visiting Israel who must pay homage to Yad Vashem, they were a new kind of German, without historical responsibility.

Attacking Israel also offered at least some leftists a way to indulge in anti-Semitism without guilt. I met a young woman active in leftist politics who assured me of her interest in Jewish culture and her commitment to remembering the Holocaust. That was the preface. Then she told me about her encounter with a group of Israeli backpackers: "They kept to themselves in such a tight circle; they wrote in little Hebrew letters I couldn't read. They all knew the same restaurants and laundromats. They'd go out of their way to save 10 cents. Their stinginess disgusted me." To emphasize her disgust, she visibly shuddered.

Were one to accuse this woman of anti-Semitism, she would, of course, be outraged. It didn't matter that she was repeating classic anti-Semitic stereotypes; she was not attacking

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Jews, but Israelis.

And yet, despite the hostility, I have found leftists here who are surprisingly sensitive toward Israel; because of them, I cannot dismiss the German left as an enemy. The young people in the Meerbaum House, the Protestant youth club I visited, were sympathetic to the Palestinians, but careful not to rebuke Israel too harshly. In fact, while the walls were covered with posters supporting all

the popular Third World causes, there was, conspicuously, no mention of the PLO. Only one young man in the club took a hard line against Israel, saying that he felt the same obligation to protest injustice there as he did anywhere else. The group leader, a woman named Ute Stein, said emotionally, "Germans don't have the right to condemn Israel, not only because of the past but because there is still anti-Semitism in us."

Whatever stereotypes I had of German leftists were negated by Jorn Bohme, the Green Party's new Middle East parliamentary advisor. Jorn is what Jews affectionately call an

ohev Yisrael, a lover of Israel. He is the former director of the Israel program for Aktion Suhrzeichen, Action for Reconciliation, a German group which sends volunteers to work among peoples victimized by the Nazis. On the walls of Jorn's apartment are a batik of Jerusalem, a Shalom plaque, even a knitted yarmulka. On a shelf is a stack of recent copies of the *Jerusalem Post*; every night Jorn listens to Kol Yisrael, Israel Radio.

"Maybe if I hadn't had the opportunity of being exposed to Israel," Jorn said, "I might have had the same superficial approach of some people

on the left. Maybe I also would have said, 'How can the victims of the Holocaust behave this way?' Now I know how ridiculous that is, especially coming from a German. The camps weren't a place for moral and educational improvement." In Israeli political terms, Jorn is closest to Peace Now. His politics are not mine. Unlike Jorn, I am convinced that the PLO remains committed to the destruction of Israel; and that an Israeli state eight miles wide between Palestine and the sea would bring the PLO's genocidal dream within reach.

I could not expect a German leftist to be more hawkish on Israel than

Abba Eban. But to trust Jorn, I needed to know that he could at least hear my fears. More than anyone else, a German had to understand that Israel's fear of compromising its power by withdrawing from the territories was not comparable to an imperialist nation resisting the surrender of its colonies. What I expected from a German leftist, then, was an appreciation of the complexity of Israel's dilemma, which is really a struggle between the two imperatives of the Holocaust: the need for Jewish morality, and the need for Jewish strength.

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Wall

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Then Jorn told me about an incident that made me realize I could trust him without question. A few years ago, several leftwing and Palestinian groups announced plans for a march against Israel. The march was to end at the headquarters of the Berlin Jewish community. Jorn was appalled: German leftists would be turning German Jews into enemies. When Jorn saw a leaflet announcing the rally with the slogan "Zionists Out of Palestine," he decided, with some friends, to organize a counter-demonstration.

Jorn said: "I held a sign that read, 'No Anti-Semitism, Even from the Left.' Some people couldn't understand what I meant by anti-Semitism; since the Holocaust, they think anti-Semitism only means Auschwitz. I felt a tremendous anger against us. It was the only time I was ever glad to see police at a demonstration." In demonstrating against leftwing anti-Semitism, Jorn had performed an ideologue's most courageous act: to publicly oppose his own movement and risk the accusation of treason. I no longer felt the need to be defensive with Jorn about Israel, and could

concede to him, a German, that Jews too had proven they were not immune from brutality. My honesty, in turn, helped Jorn to trust me: he needed the reassurance that I, as a Jew, would not pull moral rank on him, that we could talk about Israel as two people who loved and anguished for her. Though I was an Israeli who supported policies Jorn considered repressive, and though Jorn criticized Israel, however gently and reluctantly, in a German accent, we managed to take each other seriously as moral human beings.

I asked Jorn how he felt the day the Wall was opened. He said: "My girlfriend and her parents were expelled from East Germany for dissident activity. They never thought they'd be able to return there, even for a visit. So of course I was very happy for them. I was also glad that a symbol representing oppressive state power had fallen."

"That's too detached," I said.

"I felt euphoria about what can be possible in the world," he conceded. "That things can go so far, so fast. But as a German, nothing." I told Jorn that the first time I had visited Israel was late June 1967, three weeks after Jerusalem was reunited. On the streets there were no passersby, only fellow celebrants. The euphoria lasted for months.

Now, three weeks after the Wall was opened, I had come to Berlin and

discovered a society that didn't know how to celebrate itself. The left was anxious, the right triumphalist. And the East Germans were window shopping in the West.

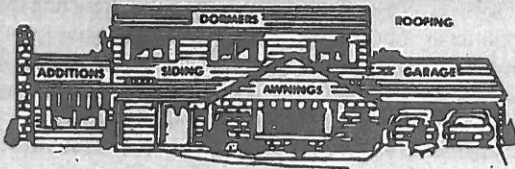
The Germans, I said to Jorn, needed some positive, even religious way to collectively experience this historical moment; their emotional healing depended on it.

Jorn said: "Many Germans complain that because of the Nazi past we have a broken national identity. But I never regretted its absence in my life. I recognize I'm a German. This is my language, my countryside. When I travel abroad I'm considered a German. But I can't say that I'm proud. I don't see how the fact that I'm a German can give me any sort of strength to help me struggle for a better world. I'm very skeptical of people who find emotional strength in their German identity. I think the world has seen enough of German pride."

Speaking with Jorn, I wondered what would become of a country whose most morally sensitive young people could not share in even its noble triumphs. And yet, at the same time, our conversation gave me hope for the German-Jewish dialogue. When a Jew speaks to a German of the future while the German insists on speaking of the past, then a new relationship between us may finally be possible. □

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