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COMMON PAST VERSUS SHARED MEMORY

Changing Perceptions in German–Jewish Relations

One of the ironies of history is that Germany, whose death machines the Jews had just escaped, became a centre for Jewish life in post-war Europe. Between January and December 1946, the number of Jewish DPs in the American Zone of Germany alone increased from 40,000 to almost 150,000. Several hundreds or thousands of Jews now populated areas that had been ignored by Hitler in his efforts to make Europe *judenrein* because no Jews were living there. The size of the Jewish population in such unlikely Bavarian places as Feldafing, Föhrenwald, Pocking and Landsberg came close to that of the pre-war centres of Jewish life in Bavaria, such as Munich and Nuremberg. Bavaria was one of the very few places in Europe where, just one year after the Holocaust, the Jewish population rose to a level higher than ever before. To be sure, this phenomenon was a temporary one, but during their stay in Germany, the Jewish DPs developed a wide-ranging network of religious, social and cultural institutions.

This all changed with the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948 and when the US began to open its doors shortly thereafter. Most Jewish DPs left Germany, but about 15–20,000 stayed on, founding new Jewish communities together with the remnant of German Jewry. The demographic situation and the feeling of a temporary home lasted for the German-Jewish postwar community for several decades. A major transformation of German Jewry started, at least in the larger communities, in the 1980s, when the first generation of Jews born in postwar Germany acknowledged that both they and their children would probably continue to live on what the survivors had referred to as cursed soil. For decades, Jews in postwar Germany lived 'with their bags packed.' By the late 1970s, however, most of these bags were already unpacked. The Jewish communities no longer regarded themselves as 'liquidation communities' but began instead to plan for the future. In 1979, the Hochschule für Jüdische Studien opened its doors in Heidelberg to educate a new religious leadership for German-speaking Jewry. In the 1980s the religious landscape changed with Liberal initiatives spreading through the major cities and thus challenging the mainly Orthodox-run communities. The public appearances and street demonstrations of German Jews on the occasion of the attempted performance of an antisemitic Fassbinder play in Frankfurt or at the Kohl–Reagan visit to Bitburg signified a new self-confidence. The election of Ignatz Bubis as President of the Central Council of Jews in Germany in 1992 marked a significant change of image for the German-Jewish community. Bubis succeeded the stern Auschwitz survivor Heinz Galinski and his predecessor, the corrupt Werner

Nachmann, who had enriched himself with millions of German Marks of reparation money. A child survivor of the Holocaust, Bubis symbolised a new optimism among German Jews. He is today one of the best known public figures in Germany, having even been suggested as a candidate for the post of President of the Federal Republic.

All these changes would have been little more than cosmetic, if the demographics had not also changed. In 1989, the official number of Jews in Germany was 27,711, more or less the same number as during the preceding 30 years. Despite natural population decline and one of the highest intermarriage rates, the size of the postwar German-Jewish community has remained constant due to a steady trickle of immigrants. In the 1950s there were returnees from Israel and South America; in 1956 and 1968 Jews came to Germany from Poland; and in the 1970s Iranian Jews settled mainly in Hamburg, while Israelis moved to all major cities. Some Russian Jews ended up in Berlin and a few other places as early as the 1970s, but even in the late 1980s there were still no signs of a dramatic change in the situation.

November 9th, a date that had once signified the downfall of German and European Jewry, received an additional meaning in both German and German-Jewish history in 1989. When the Berlin wall came down, the doors were opened not only to hundreds of thousands of East Germans from the former GDR and to ethnic Germans from the former Soviet Union but also to somewhat more unlikely candidates for immigration. Owing to a rise in antisemitic rhetoric and action, as well as political instability and economic depression, Jews in the former Soviet Union began to look for new homes. Most of them found them in the Jewish homeland, while others went to what was often still perceived as the Goldene Medine. But not all Russian, Ukrainian and Baltic Jews were prepared to move to a country threatened by war and internal tension, and not all were able to obtain immigrant visas to the United States. Those who were willing to leave but did not want to go to Israel and could not go to the US had one other option – to stay in Europe and settle in the newly reunified Germany. Why Germany? Perhaps because Germany was the only country in the world apart from Israel that could not say no to Jews knocking at its gates. Considering itself the legal successor of Nazi Germany and anxious to confront its own past, the German government had attempted to preserve and protect its tiny Jewish community. Postwar democratic Germany had always been judged, among other things, by its behaviour towards the Jews. To close the door on an influx of potential Jewish immigrants thus seemed impossible for the 'New Germany'. By the turn of the millennium the German-Jewish community had tripled to 100,000 members. All these developments had their impact on German–Jewish relations as well.

The term German–Jewish relations has been much debated, since it implies that German Jews cannot be German. There can be no doubt, however, that when it comes to the Holocaust, the collective memories of Germans and Jews diverge. In this respect Jews and Germans face a common past, which is anything but a shared memory. To blur this distinction

is, in my view, one of the major issues of recent debates to which the writer Martin Walser gave only the starting signal. It was Klaus von Dohnanyi, the former mayor of Hamburg, who said the decisive words in this struggle over memory in a conversation with Ignatz Bubis: "What would you, the Jews, have done, if the Nazis had not been antisemitic?" One might argue that Dohnanyi could legitimately ask this question. His father had been executed as part of the anti-Hitler resistance, representing the 'other' Germany. However, this kind of statement lies at the core of turning a common past into a shared memory, at least a hypothetically shared memory, in which anyone could have been a perpetrator and anyone could have been a victim. Thus, Dohnanyi immediately spelled out the logical continuation of the argument: "We are vulnerable, too." And we, of course, stands for the (non-Jewish) German. Martin Walser, going one step further in the next round of the battle, even told the Holocaust survivor Bubis: "I dealt with those topics long before you." While Ernst Nolte, in the Historians' Debate of the 1980s, tried to close the Holocaust by means of historicisation, by sealing up a historical chapter, the method chosen by Martin Walser is quite different. He and his generation cannot bear a constant confrontation with the Holocaust; they are overwhelmed emotionally by the horrible pictures on television and the recurrent cinema adaptations, and cannot look at it anymore.

Outside Germany many observers wonder why the debate has become so highly charged with emotion and why, over a period of a decade and a half, one debate has followed another. Beginning with the Historians' Debate in the mid-1980s, it is only in the last few years that these discussions have reached their climax, with topics like the Goldhagen book, the Wehrmacht exhibit, and the endless debates about the Berlin Holocaust Monument. Some observers claim that this is because the generation of people with direct involvement is dying out. Clearly, however, other factors are also involved, and I would like to draw attention to one such factor that has been consistently overlooked.

A new consensus was gradually established in German society as the events of 1968 made their effect on the immediate postwar generation and with the enormous impact of the TV mini-series "Holocaust" on the younger generation a decade later. By then the period described so aptly by Norbert Frei in his book *Vergangenheitspolitik* came to and end, and a new period of facing the past began to dominate public life. Aleida Assmann, in her work about cultural memory, distinguishes between the society of shame that dominated Germany in the postwar period and the society of guilt that culminated perhaps with the 1985 speech of then President Richard von Weizsäcker and his use of the Hasidic saying "Redemption through Memory," which has been used over and over again since then.

German Jews as well as many other Germans regarded this consensus as providing a long-term foundation on which to build a modern German society and, indeed, as a model for any society looking back on its own

crimes. The plan to build a Holocaust monument – also formulated in the 1980s – was perhaps the most radical expression of this new attitude. It was an initiative without any precedent: a society builds a monument not for its own war victims but for the victims of its own war and crimes. Since the 1980s, many German Jews, as well as others, have considered this consensus to be so self-evident that they simple cannot imagine a German public figure openly disagreeing with the commonly accepted view of the past. To condemn antisemitism, to recognise the uniqueness of Nazi crimes, and to continue to confront the Nazi past as in the previous two decades, became standard requirements – and there were certain rules on how to adhere to them. For people who violated such rules, such as the former Bundestag Speaker Jenninger, the consequence was clear: they had to resign. Obviously, the gravity of the consequences diminished with the passing of the years. Thus although Martin Walser's statements were far more poignant than Jenninger's unfortunate remarks made a decade earlier, there was no lack of prominent defenders for Walser, who was honoured by various circles even after the debate became rather emotional. This shows a certain shift of opinion, which is also expressed in the much-repeated statement that the consensus of the 1980s amounted to no more than "politically correctness" and did not reflect true opinions.

It is often forgotten that many of the people who stood at the centre of German–Jewish disputes from the 1980s had previously been in the very midst of German–Jewish co-operative efforts: Ernst Nolte, the Berlin historian who started the Historians' Debate with his questioning of the uniqueness of the Holocaust and who has since sunk deeper and deeper into abstruse historical theories, had once been one of the editors of the Herzl diaries, a co-operative German–Israeli scholarly enterprise; Jenninger was considered an outspoken friend of Israel before he had to step down after his disastrous speech in the Bundestag; Klaus von Dohnanyi only recently opened the Hamburg Magbit evening, a fundraising event organised by the local Jewish community for Israel. He has been and still is a regular participant in the German–Jewish dialogues organised by the Bertelsmann foundation.

The role of the late Rudolf Augstein in these debates deserves a little bit more attention. The long-time editor of the most influential German weekly, *Der Spiegel,* placed a provocative comment on the Walser Debate and the planned Holocaust Memorial in his magazine. It was left to Augstein to spell out what his friend Martin Walser had only paraphrased: "One cannot dictate to us from outside the country how we should form our new capital in memory of the past," he wrote. One wonders, for a moment, who is dictating what from outside? Was it not a very German issue to initiate the discussion about a Holocaust monument in Berlin, even if the main protagonist, Lea Rosh, after adopting a Jewish-sounding name is believed by many Germans to be Jewish? After all, it was a truly German *Bürgerinitiative* with the special interest of the Christian Democratic Chancellor. But this is not enough for Augstein: German-Jews should stay out of the debate altogether:

Bubis is too "befangen," Michel Friedman "isn't the right person," and even the self-appointed German-Jewish patriot Professor Michael Wolffsohn from the University of the German Armed Forces, who rushed to be first in line to demand Bubis' resignation, is not left out by Augstein, who disqualifies him from participating in the Walser debate by questioning his literary knowledge.

At the end, Augstein happily states that finally all taboos are broken. All taboos? Not really, if one reads Augstein's text. He still believes he needs to use codewords to denounce American Jews. He does not mention the word Jew once, but everyone knows who is meant when he speaks about "the New York Press" and the "sharks in lawyers' robes". Where he does in fact use the term Jews, he quotes Konrad Adenauer who allegedly said: "World Jewry is a mighty power."

It is the Germans that emerge, in recent statements by Walser, Augstein, and Dohnanyi (by the way, all are part of the same generation), as just as vulnerable *(verletzbar)* as the real victims. Dohnanyi introduced this term, but Augstein and others happily adopted it. Augstein even went so far as to claim that if the construction of the Holocaust monument went ahead, his fellow Germans will "be beaten up by the world press every year for their whole lives and until the seventh generation." This is hardly a pleasant vision for a vulnerable nation. The often-heard statement "The Germans will never forgive the Jews the Holocaust" may soon be turned to the statement: "The Germans will never forgive the Jews the Holocaust monument."

In an annual lecture honouring the Scholl brothers and sister who led the anti-Nazi resistance movement at Munich University, Klaus von Dohnanyi made a quite interesting appeal: it would be better to build a monument to German resistance fighters. That, of course, could never be called by Martin Walser a monumentalisation of German shame; instead it would be a tribute to German courage. One cannot help but draw a somewhat cynical conclusion: perhaps one could solve the insolvable riddle about what is the most appropriate monument by a simple sculpture inscribed with the words "To a vulnerable nation".

Only a few years ago Martin Walser delivered the speech for Victor Klemperer, who had been posthumously awarded the Geschwister-Scholl-Award. As the *Sueddeutsche Zeitung* noted at the time, the dead have no way of choosing those who would laud them. In this speech, Walser made a very crucial distinction, which popped up again in another more recent speech. There are good Jews, like Klemperer, who had, of course, converted before World War I and symbolised the most assimilated segment of German Jewry; then there were the rather negative examples, and Walser mentions, explicitly Gershom Scholem, who never believed in a German–Jewish symbiosis. To mention repeatedly Klemperer as the best example of a successful German–Jewish coexistence just shows how little Walser understands of German-Jewish history and of Scholem's arguments. This naivité is, to my understanding, the only possible excuse for Walser's recent statements. They are, however, well received in the German public,

and it was – not by chance – *Der Spiegel* that published Walser's speech on Klemperer. To give another similar example: at a recent meeting with German high school teachers it was almost impossible to tell them why, from a Jewish point of view, it was not ideal to use Edith Stein, who died as a Christian in Auschwitz, as a paradigmatic example of German-Jewish existence.

Let me conclude with a few remarks about the Holocaust Monument, which will soon be standing in the very centre of Berlin. If the Germans feel it has to be built – fine. But one thing should be clear: it is no Jewish monument. Who would come to the Brandenburg Gate to mourn the death of one's grandmother who was killed in Auschwitz? Even if we try, such a monument cannot be, at the same time, a site where the Jews mourn their dead and where the Germans think of what was, after all, a German crime. The use of such a monument as an occasion to create a retrospective German–Jewish symbiosis of mourning – even if it were a negative symbiosis as Dan Diner has suggested, is condemned to failure from the outset. Such an attempt would amount to exactly what the Walsers and Dohnanyis have in mind: to blur the line between a common past and a shared memory.

Where are we, then, at the beginning of the 21st century with respect to German–Jewish relations? Certainly not, where many would wish to be, at a point of normalcy, whatever this means. At the same time, however, one can also see these debates as the final expression of a debate in which the survivors are still actively engaged and have finally overcome a long period of speechlessness, and also as the culmination of an encounter with the past of their parents of the generation of 1968. The younger generation, now in the their twenties and thirties, have shown little interest in these debates; indeed, they may be able to establish a more normal mutual relationship. Today's younger generation has little use for either a society of shame or a society of guilt. It makes no sense to continue to apply these two terms to the generation growing up today, which would clearly reject them anyway. Responsibility for their own past may be a more useful term and a more realistic one.

Finally, it is important what happens on the Jewish side in Germany. Germany is a part of the new Europe that is hopefully now emerging. And the Jews in Germany – many of whom hesitated for many years before accepting German passports, and who claimed, if they were asked abroad, to be from Switzerland – will find it more easy to say they are European Jews. Even more so than in other European countries, the future of German Jewry is closely bound to the success of the experiment of European integration. For German Jews the vision of a newly formed European Jewish identity looks especially attractive. As Europeans rather than as Germans, Jews will be able to identify with a promising future rather than a bleak past.