German, Jewish and Neither

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Laupheim, a small town in southern Germany, once boasted a large Jewish community and named a prominent street after one of its Jewish sons: Carl Laemmle, who went on to found Universal Studios. But all of that changed in the 1930s. By 1992, when I started fifth grade, Laemmle's name had long since been removed from the map, and my mother and I were the only Jews in town.

"Allsbach, Lisa," the teacher asked at the beginning of our first class. "Protestant or Catholic?"

"What?"

"I have to sign you up for either Catholic or Protestant religion classes. So, Lisa?"

"Catholic."

"Good. Bach, Klaus?"

"Protestant."

"Emmerle, Johannes?"

The list went on. Soon, I realized, Herr Weiss would get to M. And I still didn't know what to say — in part out of an instinctive understanding that I would be marked out; in part because, not being religious, really, I didn't know the right answer.

"Mounk, Yascha. Protestant or Catholic?"

"Well, I guess I'm sort of Jewish."

The class laughed. Uproariously.

"Stop making things up," Johannes Emmerle, a Protestant, shouted as the hilarity ebbed. "Everybody knows that the Jews don't exist anymore!"

Herr Weiss reprimanded Johannes. "Don't talk unless I call on you. We must have order. O.K., Yascha. You'll have a free period when the others take religion. There's a Turk in another class, I think. You two can keep each other company."

Then he added, as an afterthought: “And, Johannes, you are wrong, as a matter of fact. There are a few Jews. Again.”

Johannes wasn’t too far off the mark. Of the more than 500,000 Jews who lived in Germany when Hitler took power in 1933, only about 15,000 remained on German territory at war’s end, and many of them planned to emigrate. German Jews, it seemed, would soon be extinct.

But that extinction never came to pass. Some Jews who had fled the Third Reich returned to build a new, better society. Others, liberated from the concentration camps but without a home to return to, temporarily settled in camps for “displaced persons.” Most of them soon made their way to Israel or the United States, but some got stuck for one reason or another, and never left. As West Germany rapidly grew, more Jews came to the country as businessmen, artists or refugees — especially after the fall of the Soviet Union, when tens of thousands were encouraged to relocate. All told, well over 100,000 Jews now live in the Federal Republic.

My family, too, came to West Germany as immigrants. Born in the shtetls of Eastern Europe, my grandparents embraced Communism as teenagers, leaving home to become political activists. They survived the Holocaust by fleeing to the Soviet Union and returned to Poland after the war, keen to put their ideals into practice at long last. But then the regime they had helped to build threw them out amid a large-scale anti-Semitic witch hunt. Out of options, my mother and her father sought refuge in West Germany.

Born in 1982 as the citizen of a peaceful, affluent and increasingly cosmopolitan country, I spent a mostly happy childhood in places like Munich, Freiburg and Karlsruhe. I was a fervent supporter of the national soccer team and dreamed of running for the Bundestag. German is, and will remain, the only language I speak without an accent.

My family’s Jewish identity has never been strong. I had neither a bris nor a bar mitzvah. When I was young, my mother gave me Christmas presents so that I wouldn’t feel left out.

Even so, as I grew older, I felt more and more Jewish — and less and less German. Gradually, I concluded that staying in Germany was not for me.

The reaction of my classmates in Laupheim might suggest that ignorance or hatred — which have subsided since I was a child, but remain real problems — are why I left. But that’s not quite true. If there was one thing that made me feel I would never truly belong, it wasn’t hostility: It was benevolence.

Starting in the 1960s, Germany began to break a silence of decades about the past. A new generation confronted its forefathers about what they had done during the

Third Reich. The country embarked on the slow, painful process of facing up to the enormity of the Holocaust.

As Germany's understanding of its history changed, so did popular attitudes toward Jews. Especially in the country's hipper neighborhoods, Judaism was suddenly all the rage. Nary a literary reading failed to feature a Yiddish poem. Few were the gallery openings that lacked an ensemble of Aryans playing klezmer. Especially in the 1980s and early 1990s, it seemed as though the whole country had come down with a bout of philo-Semitism.

I first realized that I had become a flesh-and-blood object for this demonstrative good will when I moved from provincial Laupheim to cosmopolitan Munich. Suddenly, I found myself treated as a kind of celebrity — somebody to be admired for being different, but also to be handled with special care.

When I went to a party thrown by Franz, a high-school friend, I found him in a heated discussion about Woody Allen with a soft-spoken blonde.

"Franz here thinks that Woody is creepy and that his movies are mediocre," Marie, the girl, told me.

"No, no," Franz said, turning bright red. "I never said he was creepy or mediocre."

"You just said he was creepy because he married Mia Farrow's daughter. And that he's not as serious as — "

"Well," Franz hedged, glancing at me, "I didn't mean it quite like that. Sure, it's a little weird that he married his girlfriend's daughter. But, you know, they were both adults and it's not illegal, so — "

"Why are you being so strange?" Marie asked.

"I'm not being strange at all. It's just important to see both sides of the argument. You make it sound as though I had something against Woody Allen. I don't. He's a likable guy. As you said, his Jew humor is admirable."

Marie turned to me, with a mocking smile. "You must be the reason for Franz's sudden transformation. What's the deal? Are you writing something about Woody Allen? Or are you related to him?"

I laughed. "Rest assured that I have no particular horse in this race."

Franz mumbled, "Well, actually, yes, in a way, Yascha is re — " Helplessly, he petered out.

“What?” Marie asked. “You really are related to Woody Allen?”

Franz stared at Marie, Marie stared at me, and I scanned the room for a desperately needed drink.

“No, not at all,” I finally replied. “I guess what Franz meant to say is that I’m Jewish.”

Marie gasped. “Oh, how exciting. A real Jew!”

Franz, meanwhile, set about telling me how great a work “Deconstructing Harry” was.

At first, I enjoyed the attention. After living in a place where my classmates had known so little about what it meant to be Jewish, it was nice to be treated with kid gloves. But my excitement did not last long. Increasingly, I realized that the mere mention of my heritage erected an invisible wall between my classmates and me. Back in Laupheim, there had at least been a kind of bravery in asserting my heritage. In Munich, I found myself increasingly circumspect about revealing my identity.

My experience of philo-Semitism had another effect. Until I moved to Munich, I had never doubted that I was a German. But now I realized that even my most well-intentioned compatriots saw me as a Jew first, and a German second. And so I, too, began to identify as more of a Jew than a German.

My feeling of not belonging only intensified as the philo-Semitic moment faded, and a new mood of “enough is enough” took hold. In 1998, the novelist Martin Walser argued that Germans had become unhealthily obsessed with the Third Reich, and that the memory of Auschwitz was increasingly being used to harm Germany. The country, he said, should draw a definitive “finish line” underneath the past. Polls found that most Germans agreed.

Once again, Germany’s changed understanding of its past manifested itself in ordinary interactions. One Saturday morning, for example, I went to Munich’s Oktoberfest with a group of acquaintances. A jolly brass band in lederhosen was playing. We clinked our mugs in a traditional Bavarian toast.

Stephanie, a petite woman in her late 30s, was trying to make a joke. “How do you fit 200 Jews into a Volkswagen Beetle?” she asked.

“Knock it off,” said Hans, a big-boned, folksy friend of mine. “This is not appropriate.”

“Why should I?” Stephanie shot back. “Because you tell me to shut up? Because they tell me to shut up? Come on, it’s just a joke!”

“I doubt it’ll be funny,” Hans said.

"Not funny? Have a sense of humor! Why can't a joke about the Jews be funny? It's 2006. The Holocaust happened 60 years ago. We should tell jokes about the Jews again!"

"Look," Hans said, "you know as well as I do that Germans have a special responsibility to be sensi — "

"A special responsibility? I'm not even 40! No, no. I won't stay silent any longer. Here's how you fit them in. You gas them. You incinerate them. You stuff them in the ashtray. That's how you do it."

Stephanie's tasteless joke allowed me to put in words what had long made me uncomfortable even about less crass advocates of the "finish line." Clearly, there was something artificial about the ritualistic displays of historical contrition that had long been central to public life in Germany. But to assert that the time had come to move beyond the past, once and for all, was no less artificial. Normality cannot be decreed by fiat.

Both the ignorance I had encountered in Laupheim and the philo-Semitism I experienced in Munich had made me feel like an outsider — but each also made me more determined to help in the creation of a German-Jewish identity. Now that my very presence was enough to make some people resentful, however, I grew impatient with the endless complications of being a German Jew. I wanted nothing more than to be seen, finally, as an individual. And so, despite everything I loved about Germany, and unlike so many other German Jews, I decided to leave.

When I first moved to New York, as a graduate student, I hoped that living here would make it possible for me to choose who I wanted to be. In Germany, I always thought twice before mentioning that my ancestors were Jewish: I knew that, once I'd pronounced that fateful word, I would, in the minds of many, be reduced to it. In New York, a city of more than a million Jews, I found that this hardly changed how others saw me.

Being free to construct my own identity has had an unexpected effect: I've come to realize that being Jewish is not particularly important to me after all. Sure, I enjoy "Seinfeld" and a whitefish bagel. But is that enough to make me "culturally" a Jew? I'm not convinced. I can see why many other secular, nonobservant Jews — who speak Hebrew, or grew up following Jewish ritual — feel that being Jewish defines them. But defining myself strongly as a Jew when I know so little about religion or ritual would, I believe, cheapen the tradition I would be claiming to invoke.

New York has given me the same liberty it has afforded generations of immigrants: the freedom to be true to myself. In an age of identity politics, we assume that this must mean the freedom to proclaim one's identity. But, for me, it has just as much to do with the liberty to shed an identity to which I'd long been reduced.

A true New Yorker, E.B. White suggested, is one who has come to the city "in quest of something." It is because New York is defined as much by its newcomers as by its natives that I hope to spend my life here. My identity is no longer that of a Jew or a German. It is that of a seeker who has found; that of a stranger who has come to be at home; that of, simply and immeasurably, a New Yorker.

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