Jewish Ideas Weekly

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January 25-February 1, 2013

Friday, January 25

Not Ordinary at All

By Chaya Glasner

United Nations Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon dedicated this year's International Holocaust Remembrance Day to rescuers of Nazi victims who were not famous heroes but little-known people living "ordinary" lives. Yet some of those little-known rescuers lived anything but ordinary lives, like the extraordinary Berta Davidovitz Rubinsztejn.

When Berta celebrated her 90th birthday in New York this summer, one guest—Meir Brand, a white-haired grandfather of eight—made the trip from Israel. Berta calls Meir her son. He is, but not in any ordinary sense.

In 1941, when Berta was 18, her family of five fled Poland and crossed the Carpathian Mountains into still-unoccupied Hungary, where Jews were being persecuted but not yet hunted down. One night the family was hiding, crowded together, in a sheep stall, when Berta's father, fearing his children would be killed, cried, "For what did I bring you into the world?" From her father's desperation Berta took the conviction that sustained her for the next five years: "Better to be killed than to hide!"

Berta made her way to Budapest in 1942, where she began working for the Zionist underground through the youth movement Dror Habonim. She assumed a Gentile identity and the name Bigota Ilona and wore a crucifix around her neck. She would meet in a park with other Dror Habonim members living as Gentiles to plan operations and smuggle weapons.

Jewish parents in more dangerous places were then bribing Gentiles and using other means to smuggle their children into Budapest, where the Zionist underground had a list of the children's names but often not their locations. The underground worked to find them, and any other Jewish children they could discover, and get them to safety. An indirect participant in many of their operations was Rudolf Kasztner, a Hungarian Jew, who was head of Hungary's Zionist Aid and Rescue Committee. "I saw Kasztner in Budapest in 1943," Berta remembered, but "we *halutzim* saw him only from afar. He knew we were Jews pretending to be Gentiles, and we knew not to talk to him because the Germans were watching him."

In May, 1944, Kasztner made a daring deal to provide trucks to Adolf Eichmann in exchange for the safe passage of Jews out of Hungary by train, to the neutral country of Spain and ultimately to Palestine. The goal of Dror Habonim became getting Jewish children onto Kasztner's train.

Berta Rubinsztejn and Meir Brand.

Meir Brand was one of those children. He was born in 1936 in Bochnia, Poland, and his family was forced into the Jewish ghetto there in 1942. After the 1943 Warsaw Ghetto uprising, Meir remembered, "everyone knew the whole ghetto"—in Bochnia—"was going to Auschwitz." Soon afterward, "the whole family," three sets of parents, "convened to decide what to do." They determined that one child of each set of parents would escape. "They told me, 'Meir, from now on you are not Meir. You are Dudac Josef. Please remember not to speak about Jewish things.' But they put a small pouch around my neck with a letter in it in Yiddish that read, 'This is not Dudac Josef. This is Meir Brand. Please educate him as an observant Jew.'"

The family paid a Polish Gentile to smuggle Meir and two of his cousins, Itek and Miriam. The man took the boys by their hands, put Miriam into a sack on his back, and made the long trek to the Slovakian border. Itek had an aunt, not family to Meir or Miriam, who met them there and accompanied them by train to Budapest.

Itek's aunt was living on a false passport that said she had two children. She had one child of her own. She could claim Itek as her other child, but not Meir. The family had found an adoptive family for Miriam, but not Meir. "So," Meir remembered, "in the middle of September, a child of eight years old stands by himself in the Budapest train station." Meir, homeless like hundreds of other Budapest refugees, took shelter under the city's bridges.

Berta found him there after seven months—alone, frozen, and covered in blisters. "Jude?" she asked. "I am Dudac Josef!" he answered.

"I didn't trust anybody," Meir remembered, "because I was under such strict instructions not to connect with anyone." Still, "I trusted Berta. Why, I don't know." When Meir said he was Dudac Josef, Berta thought, "That means, 'I am a Jew.' Somehow I knew he was a Jew. And I said, 'I am Bigota Ilona.'" About that moment, Berta later told Meir, "I looked you in the eye and said to myself, that's it, you're mine."

Berta put around 10 Jewish children on Kasztner's train, but she was especially attached to Meir. When the train left Budapest, Berta brought Meir on board with her. Once on the train, she removed her cross. "She was finished with being Bigota Ilona," Meir remembered. "I gave her my real name, Meir," and showed her, for the first time, the precious pouch around his neck.

The train ride was initially a "very happy time," he recalled. "We were sure we were going straight to safety." But by the time they stopped, "everyone understood that we weren't going to continue as planned. We

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knew something very wrong and bad had happened."

What had happened was that Kasztner's precarious negotiations were collapsing: Eichmann wanted more in ransom than Kasztner could gather. The train carrying Berta and Meir, with 1,684 passengers in all, was diverted to Bergen-Belsen. There, Berta recalled, "I was with the *halutzim*," while Meir was in a barracks with the other children. Still very weak, he couldn't clean himself or eat properly. Berta devoted herself to his care, and nursed him back to health.

Kasztner finally negotiated his passengers' release. The train made its way to Switzerland, where Berta met Kasztner, her hero. "I thanked him," she recalled. "He kissed me, and I kissed him." This was their first and last meeting. But in 1954, during a libel trial in Jerusalem based on an accusation that Kasztner had collaborated with the Nazis, Berta appeared in court to support her hero.

By then, Berta and Meir had made aliyah together, in 1946. In Israel, Meir was adopted by family members, but remained close to Berta. At her 90th birthday party, Meir simply said of her, "She is a brave woman. She was never frightened." Berta said of Meir, even more simply, "He is my son."

Monday, January 28

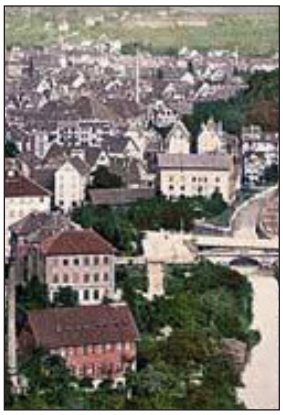
From Reparations to Atonement

By Ismar Schorsch

Ismar Schorsch, former chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America, delivered these remarks in German more than a year ago, in Hanover, where he was born and where his father served for 11 years as rabbi. He repeated them yesterday, on International Holocaust Remembrance Day, in Esslingen, his mother's birthplace. They are presented here in his translation.—The Editors

Though I have no personal memory of Germany, my father's life has long been my cherished text. His life mirrors many of the upheavals of the twentieth century. Forty-eight years ago on November 10, 1963, he returned to Hanover to deliver the dedicatory address at the modest new synagogue built to replace the majestic Oppler synagogue destroyed exactly twenty-five years before by Nazi vandals in their nationwide assault on the synagogues of Germany. My father was on the way to the synagogue for morning services when the Gestapo came to our apartment to arrest him. They informed him mockingly that the synagogue was no longer standing. He would not behold its ruins until he was released ten days later from Buchenwald where he had been sent along with 250 other Hanoverians. In the interim, family in England had secured for us a visa, and we hastily left Germany by plane in December on Hanukkah, lighting the second candle of the menorah in England after having lit the first the night before in Germany. Hanukkah became for us thereby a personal festival of religious freedom, as originally intended by the Maccabees back in the second century before the common era.

The imposing beauty of Edwin Oppler's free-standing Romanesque synagogue finished in 1870 bespoke the confidence of Hanoverian Jewry in the permanence of their long sought and recently acquired equal rights as German citizens. The precarious legal status of medieval Jews as barely tolerated subjects denied them the freedom to erect prominent houses of worship. In the absence of robust protection under the law, a low profile was the most effective way to avoid the envy and wrath of the mob. Oppler's architectural choice of Romanesque over Moorish for his soaring edifice also captured the community's pride in being Germans of long standing and not immigrants from the Orient. Still, in the span of seven decades, the Nazis made short shrift of Hanoverian Jewry's sense of belonging. The Third Reich no longer accorded protection to the sanctity of synagogues. The violence of the *Reichspogromnacht* exposed a regime unhindered by the moral, traditional, and humane constraints that forged a civilized society.



My father came to Hanover in 1927 in his senior year as a rabbinical student at the Jewish Theological Seminary in Breslau, whose successor institution in New York I would eventually head for twenty years as its sixth chancellor. Nine years before my father had witnessed the carnage and chaos of defeat as an eighteen-year-old soldier on the western front. The trauma induced him to enter the rabbinate in the naïve hope that religious values might temper the passions of humanity. What attracted him to Hanover was the absence of an organ, the presence of family, and its senior rabbi Samuel Freund, who had likewise graduated from Breslau in 1894. It was after his distinguished brother, the legal historian Ismar Freund, a 1905 graduate of Breslau, that I was named by my parents in 1935. My father excelled in particular in exciting the interest of the young through the self-governing vehicle of their own community (*Jugendgemeinde*), in which he sensitively bridged the differences between youngsters born of German parents and those whose parents had immigrated either before or after the First World War and were shamefully excluded from membership in the Hanover *Gemeinde*. On my first trip to Israel in July 1967, I stayed in a small Jerusalem pension named Greta Ascher, whose eastern European owner from Hanover showered me with gratitude for the respect and warmth with which my father had welcomed her into his *Jugendgemeinde*. She would not be the last of the appreciative beneficiaries of his spiritual largess whom I was destined to meet years later as adults. Hailing from the unpretentious piety of rural Jewish life in southwest Germany, my father felt a strong affinity to the religious praxis of Jews from eastern Europe.

My father treasured books. The library of Oppler's synagogue held an especially rich collection of responsa literature, the medium in which generations of learned rabbis had adjudicated the intricacies of Jewish law. Its loss punctuated his conversation, as did the loss of half of his own library to water in transit to the United States. I can only imagine his horror at the spectacle of bonfires of books deemed decadent by the Nazis throughout Germany on May 10, 1933. My father had the habit of inscribing his books with their date of purchase, and, on January 12, 1933, he acquired a thin volume of the traditional liturgy for Tisha b'Av, the twenty-four-hour summer

fast commemorating the destruction of Jerusalem's two temples in 586 BCE and 70 CE, as well as many a medieval calamity that had befallen Jews in exile. When the book came into my possession, as did much of his library after his death in 1982, I could not help inscribing the sober fact that Hitler had come to power on January 30, 1933. The next twelve years would inundate the old memory palace of Tisha b'Av with untold new instances of inhumanity.

My life too is a mirror of its times. If my father was ensnared by the descent of Germany into Dante's inferno on earth, I have been fortunate to witness from afar its wrenching process of expiation and ascent. By fits and starts, it has persevered in its daunting task, to internalize its history and thereby become a model for other sovereign states whose present is marred by the denial of their past. In 1963 my father could never have imagined the state of moral regeneration achieved by Germany by 2011. My own experience intersects with that transformation.

In the summer of 1977, I had arranged for a month of research in Merseburg, where the Prussian archives have been situated since the war. Prior to entering East Germany through Plauen in the south, my sister and I toured Baden, Wuerttemberg and Bavaria in a Volkswagen Beetle to visit towns, villages and cemeteries touched by the lives of our family. We were especially eager to see the stately building and farm land in Esslingen which once had housed a Jewish orphanage and school (*israelitische Waisen- und Erziehungsanstalt*) that had been founded in 1831. My great grandfather on my mother's side, Leopold Stern, had served as its director from 1873 till his death in 1899, as did his son-in-law, my mother's father, Theodor Rothschild, for the last forty years of the institution's existence. Rothschild was a charismatic and innovative educator, who introduced manual labor into the curriculum and advised his staff not to focus on the troubles that a youngster may cause, but rather on the troubles that are bedeviling him. My father came to the school from a family beset by mental illness, gravitated to my grandfather as a surrogate father and eventually married his daughter in 1928. Like him, he attended the Protestant teachers seminary in Esslingen, which fated him to spend two arduous years after the war to make up the Gymnasium equivalent of seven years of Greek and nine years of Latin in order to gain admission first to the university of Tuebingen for his Ph.D. and then to rabbinical school in Breslau for his ordination. To switch careers in Germany with its premature educational tracking system was no easy matter.

During their years in Hanover, my parents often visited and vacationed in Esslingen, and my sister, born in 1929, had many a fond memory of the spacious and airy building, put up in 1912-1913 and ceremoniously dedicated on November 11, 1913 in the presence of the king of Wuerttemberg. On November 10, 1938, in mid-day, Nazi mobsters ransacked the school and expelled its petrified children and staff. Though the school was allowed to reopen and operate on a reduced scale, the government seized the building for a hospital in August 1939. My grandfather's decision during the late 1930s not to register at the American consulate in Stuttgart for a visa for fear of triggering the closure of his school and the abandonment of his children had failed. Regrettably, he was to perish in Theresienstadt in July 1944.

My sister and I arrived unannounced. The facility was still intact as an orphanage bearing the name State Orphanage of Esslingen (*Staatliches Waisenheim Esslingen*). We rang the bell at its handsome front door bedecked fittingly by a frieze of a pelican bent over its young. No answer. School was not in session. Undeterred, we found the door open, entered and proceeded to wander leisurely through the entire building and its grounds without catching sight of a living soul. My sister, awash in memories, gave me a guided tour. Little had changed, except for the chilling absence of those she loved. But they were not all that was missing. The school gave no evidence of its former existence. No plaques, no photographs, no inscriptions to break the willful amnesia. The Jewish history of this institution had simply been obliterated, as had its occupants and religious artifacts.

For me, the uncontextured orphanage in Esslingen symbolized the German state of mind. Our first stop that summer, after we had flown into Munich, had been Dachau, whose modest museum was largely funded privately. One had to make sense of what one saw unaided: the awesome size of the place for a regime with an infinite number of enemies, the cramped conditions of the barracks for human beings degraded beyond recognition, and the crematoriums to eradicate the remains of depravity. The limited government investment in Dachau at the time proved how marginal the memory site still was.

From a Jewish perspective, I found Buchenwald in East Germany still more disturbing. Atop Ettersberg mountain in whose valley sits Weimar, once the cultural capital of Germany, and overlooking a breathtaking vista of the Thuringian mountains, Buchenwald is the ultimate obscenity of the Third Reich, a desecration of nature and history. After being in the camp but a short time, I noticed twelve tall obelisks at the mountain's edge. Each one bore the name of the nationality to which it was dedicated, and collectively they commemorated the spectrum of nations whose citizens had suffered torture and death in Buchenwald. Much was made of the murder in 1944 of Ernst Thälmann, the former head of the German Communist party, after eleven years in solitary confinement. I was outraged, however, to discover that there was no obelisk for the Jews. Obviously, my father had been incarcerated in Buchenwald as an errant German who just happened to be Jewish. While for the Communists Jewish identity was secondary, for the Nazis it most assuredly was not. Of course, the East Germans never owned up to their complicity in the Holocaust, which for them was a fascist crime committed by rapacious capitalist imperialists. The belated admission of guilt on April 12, 1990 by the German Democratic Republic's first freely elected parliament was but the moral requisite for unification with West Germany which by then was well on its way to making peace with its past.

The tone of German-Jewish relations back in 1977 was still set by the generation of the perpetrators of the Holocaust and their children. The courage shown by Konrad Adenauer in agreeing in 1952 to reparations to Israel in services and commodities over a twelve-year period of 3 billion DM and to individual Holocaust survivors of 500 million DM (a sum that by the end of 2000 had risen to nearly 103 billion DM to some 585,000 survivors, including my father) was not widely shared. On the contrary, in 1949 in the American zone of occupation a majority of Germans still held that National Socialism was a good idea badly implemented. On the issue of denazification, Adenauer steadfastly opposed and subverted the Allied policy of denying public office or influential employment to Nazi party members of whom there were no less than eight million in 1945. To recover from its catastrophic devastation (*die Stunde Null*), he believed that Germany had to amnesty and integrate on a grand scale.

Years later in his best-selling novel *Der Vorleserhe,* "The Reader" (1995), Bernhard Schlink would probe the toxic silence of those first two post-war generations with a degree of pathos that risked obscuring the metaphor for some. His unconventional plot is not a sexual fantasy meant to titillate, as contrived by Hollywood in its film version. Rather it stands for the inter-generational tragedy that occurs when children discover that their parents are guilty of a heinous crime. When Michael Berg gets to know Hanna Schmitz she is a dutiful but lonely trolley conductor. Their intense relationship is more than sexual because Hanna enjoys being read to. Michael's school work provides the literature, and his affection the animation. And then one day she abruptly disappears. It is only years later as a law student that he serendipitously discovers her to be one of the defendants in a case against a group of former female guards at an Auschwitz satellite for women. During the trial he detects that Hanna is illiterate and subsequently that she fled the streetcar company when it wished to reward her with a promotion to a job that would have required her to be able to read. Ashamed to admit her deficiency, she unwittingly enters the Nazi phalanx of death. Despite his impulse to assist Hanna at her trial, the relationship is neither restored nor ruptured. Michael is tormented by a potent brew of pity, revulsion, and bewilderment. If Hanna represents the parent generation that had elevated Hitler to power and executed his evil designs, her illiteracy was not an accidental disability, but a searing indictment of its colossal political naiveté. Accordingly, the conspiracy of silence extended well into the second generation. The experience of intimacy had stripped Michael of the freedom to turn against Hanna.

During those years of silence, however, the accumulation of knowledge about the Holocaust proceeded apace. In 1961, Raul Hilberg in the United States published his still unsurpassed study of the bureaucratic machinery by which the Nazis had annihilated most of European Jewry, a methodical work based entirely on Nazi documents brought to light by the nearly 1000 cases of war criminals tried at Nuremberg and elsewhere from 1945 to 1948, making it a massive indictment of self-incrimination. That same year saw the trial of Adolf Eichmann in Jerusalem, which granted more than one hundred witnesses the chance to elaborate the suffering of the victims. Hannah Arendt's abrasive coverage of the trial for *The New Yorker* magazine provoked a fire storm of criticism that only served to further the cause of Holocaust research. In Germany Fritz Bauer, the Jewish District Attorney of Hesse, who had helped lead the Israelis to Eichmann in Argentina, managed, against great opposition, to stage in Frankfurt am Main from 1963 to 1965 what became known as the second Auschwitz trials, though the first large scale German-initiated judicial action against former Nazis. In the dock were some twenty-two administrative personnel from the Auschwitz-Birkenau complex. Bauer persuaded some 210 survivors to return to Germany to tell their agonizing stories, and in the end secured seventeen convictions, including seven life sentences. The exclusion of television from the court room suggests the eagerness of German officials to downplay the wider resonance of the trials. Their impact on scholarship, however, was immediate. In 1965, four German historians, Helmut Krausnick, Hans Buchheim, Martin Broszat and Hans-Adolf Jacobsen, who had been called by Bauer to testify as expert witnesses, published their penetrating analysis of the dual character of the Third Reich under the title *Anatomie des SS-Staates*, which appeared in English three years later.

Two popular works in the next decade contributed mightily to turning the knowledge of the few into the awareness and appreciation of the many. The first was Lucy S. Dawidowicz's 1975 history of the Holocaust, *The War Against the Jews: 1933-1945*, which for the first time integrated the Nazi and Jewish stories with their disparate German and Yiddish sources into a mesmerizing narrative. A strong reader and artful writer, Dawidowicz crafted a best-seller that pulsated with existential angst. Yet the most effective medium of dissemination proved to be television. In April 1978, the National Broadcasting Company (NBC) riveted half of America with its nine-and-one-half-hour miniseries *Holocaust: The Story of the Family Weiss* aired on four successive nights during the week before the Passover holiday. Its author, the novelist Gerald Green, had skillfully compressed the mind-boggling number of six million victims of Nazi genocide into the saga of a single family, whose inexorable fate every viewer could grasp and identify with. Its unexpectedly stunning reception by some twenty million viewers in West Germany the following year also altered the map of Holocaust consciousness in Germany.

The third generation, the grandchildren of the perpetrators, was coming of age. With distance came the freedom to confront the myths that exonerated with the facts that implicated. The German film of 1980, *Das schreckliche Mädchen* (shown in the U.S. as *The Nasty Girl*) caught the seismic shift underway. Based on the actual experience of Anna Rosmus in Passau, Bavaria, the film depicts the outrage and abuse to which a high school student and her family are subjected when she refuses to quash an essay written for a school prize which uncovered the wholesale complicity of the local population at the time in the crimes of the Nazis.

Once again my own journey reflects the change. By 1983, the municipal authorities in Esslingen had decided to accord a modicum of justice to the past by officially renaming the orphanage Das Theodor Rothschild Haus. And, in July 1994, the city invited my sister and me to speak in the school at a commemoration of the fiftieth anniversary of my grandfather's death in Theresienstadt. Despite oppressively hot weather, the spacious lobby of the school was packed. Konrad Richter, the well known pianist and former rector of the conservatory in Stuttgart, graced the program with a piano sonata by Victor Ullmann, a Silesian born Jew by birth, who had composed his last one in Theresienstadt in August 1944. What could have been more fitting to evoke the memory of my grandfather! Since 1989, Richter had dedicated himself to the noble project of reassembling the music of Ullmann, who was murdered in Auschwitz in October 1944, and that of other composers cut down by the Nazis. I have cherished his atonal music ever since, especially because Richter gave me a set of two CDs which recorded his own nuanced rendition of seven Ullmann piano sonatas.

In honor of the occasion, the organizers of the commemoration mounted a small exhibit of items in city hall pertaining to Jewish life in Esslingen. The town had a modest synagogue that was destroyed on *Reichspogromnacht* and the exhibit included a short film clip of its ruins from the next day. Astonishingly, the anonymous photographer chose to focus at length on the curiosity seekers. Their Sunday-clothes and unhurried pace betrayed no evidence that anything amiss had happened. The calm suggested a stroll to a museum or concert. What state of mind did the passivity denote: concurrence, apathy or intimidation? The absence of shock or dismay underscored how utterly

isolated the Jews had become. There was no one to turn to for help. Disengaged bystanders are always the necessary accomplices of evil perpetrators. The visibility of what had been done to the Jews on *Reichspogromnacht* implicated all Germans. The exhibition of that film clip revealed not only a rare historical document, but also highlighted an avowal that Germans no longer had reason to fear the unvarnished truth.

Four years after our visit, a local band of Christians devoted to the memory of my grandfather came out with a splendid quarto size book of more than 200 pages on his career. Published by the museum and cultural department of Esslingen (*Kulturreferat und Stadtmuseum Esslingen am Neckar*), it bore the title *Theodor Rothschild: ein jüdischer Pädegoge zwischen Achtung und Aechtung* (A Jewish Educator between Respect and Contempt), and consisted of eight extensively researched essays that related his educational thought and leadership. The book lent texture and meaning to the disembodied name inscribed on the building of his school and gave me the chance to fill a void in my own life.

The cascade of debates and events since the 1980s that marked the era of the third generation—far too many to survey here—was rapidly culminating in a national spirit of penance for the Holocaust. If Chancellor Helmut Kohl managed to bungle the Bitburg commemoration on May 5, 1985, his generous admission at Bergen Belsen two weeks before of Germany's "historical responsibility for the crimes of Nazi tyranny" and "its never-ending shame" did sound a pained note of remorse. In a noteworthy overlap, both he and President Richard von Weizäcker in his own stirring confessional address to the Bundestag on May 8 invoked the same eighteenth-century Hasidic admonition: "Seeking to forget makes exile all the longer; the secret of redemption lies in remembrance."

That fall both Chancellor and President hosted receptions in Berlin for the participants of the first Leo Baeck Institute conference on German soil. In 1933, with the Nazi ascendancy to power, Leo Baeck had declared unequivocally that "the thousand-year history of German Jewry is over" (*die thousendjährige Geschichte der deutschen Juden ist zu Ende*), and, in 1955, a small group of German Jewish leaders and intellectuals who had survived the war set up the research institute bearing his name to ensure that that history would not be forgotten. By 1985, the institute was ready to acknowledge that many sectors of German society were committed to the same goal. Nevertheless, under the rubric of "Self-Assertion in Adversity" (*Selbstbehauptung in der Not*), it provocatively chose to devote its first appearance to the darkest chapter of that history, the years 1933-1939. Though the institute is not a replica of Yad Vashem, its leadership in this instance was determined to use scholarship as a vehicle of expiation.

One of the founders of the Leo Baeck Institute was Martin Buber, and, on June 18, 1990, Chancellor Kohl commemorated the 25th anniversary of his death by inviting me to address an assembly of notables at Buber's modest home in Heppenheim on his legacy. Despite the imminent collapse of the Soviet Union and the exhilarating prospect of German reunification, the Chancellor took the time to honor the memory of a man who embodied the spiritual resistance of German Jewry under the Nazis and indeed the vitality of biblical interpretation in the spiritual life of Judaism.

In short, the Germany of today in no way resembles the Germany of 1963. A sentiment once restricted to the office of the Chancellor and expressed largely in monetary terms has become a grassroots commitment to take ownership of the past. The laying of stumbling stones (*Stolpersteine*) in front of dwellings which were once home to Jews with their names and dates of flight or eviction is an inspired way to individualize the act of memorialization at both ends. Not long ago, I received a touching letter from a high school student in Esslingen inviting me to join his class in placing such stumbling stones where Jews once resided. Their project included doing the research that yielded the information for each medallion.

Visiting the Jewish Museum in Berlin, which opened in 2001, is yet another gesture of individual contrition. Each year its robust attendance puts it in the forefront of Germany's most frequented museums. Though its famous Liebeskind design is affectively oriented toward the Final Solution, its mission is to convey a semblance of the history of German speaking Jewry. Those who visit are clearly more interested in what was destroyed than how it was and sense that the economic and cultural impoverishment that resulted reached into every facet of German life.

Still a third venue for individual reconciliation is the university. The critical study of Judaism was launched and flourished in nineteenth-century Germany, when its vaunted universities pioneered the turn to history. Yet the first chair in the field was not created till 1964 at the Free University in Berlin. Today German universities are host to a substantial number of professors of Judaica and their academic assistants, who work in a broad array of sub-fields. Though most are not Jewish, they have spent time in Israel to master Hebrew, acquire some command of the classical religious texts of Judaism and use its rich archival holdings. Above all, their scholarship is often first-rate. There was a time when scholars of Judaica needed to know German to read the books and essays written prior to the Third Reich. Now the language is indispensable because of the high quality of contemporary German scholarship. There is in fact an overproduction of young scholars of Judaica in Germany and some will end up working for municipal or state governments eager to create a regional Jewish museum or sponsor a history of the local Jewish community that came to grief under the Nazis. I have long felt that for a good many of these scholars of Judaica, both young and old, the subject is a calling as well as a career, a form of personal *Wiedergutmachung*.

My first glimpse of Berlin's Holocaust Memorial did not come until November 2007, as I walked from my hotel in the Hackerscher Markt to the Oriental Department of the *Staatsbibliothek* on Potsdamer Strasse for the opening session of an academic conference. Unawares, I approached the Memorial and it took me a few moments to realize what confronted me. After that encounter, I made sure to pass it on foot twice each day of the conference (I am an avid walker). During the twelve-year debate leading up to the Memorial, I had my reservations about its grandiosity. I prefer memorials that accentuate absence. To his credit, Chancellor Kohl was a firm backer of the project. I was deeply moved by its understated power and quiet beauty. What Peter Eisenman's combination of abstractness and concreteness on five acres of the most expensive real estate in Berlin conjured up for me was a cemetery of unmarked tombstones, whose number conveyed the size of the calamity. Stripped of their humanity, Hitler's victims died anonymously, indistinguishable one from the other. The absence of any signage to identify the site or even security guards to protect it added to its sanctity, nor did graffiti desecrate it. In the midst of a capital city bursting with life, the Federal Government offered a silent and artless sanctuary to me-

morialize the dead, to which Germans no longer needed an introduction.

Ironically, the most conspicuous landmark in Berlin's Mitte as seen from the top of the Reichstag building is the glorious dome of the synagogue on Oranienburger Strasse. To me, it symbolizes both the past and the future. Dedicated in 1866 in the presence of Bismarck and a galaxy of government officials, the edifice projected the size, wealth and influence of the city's burgeoning Jewish community. It was spared on *Reichspogromnacht* because it stood adjacent to buildings on either side. In 1943, Allied bombers destroyed the rear two-thirds of the building, where the sanctuary was located. In time after the war, the façade along with its dome, which loomed over the front of the building rather than over the sanctuary to be more visible from the street, were reconstructed. The vast space which once constituted the sanctuary remains empty, separated from the museum on the ground floor of the façade by a glass partition. To peer into that void brings to mind for me the congregation that once filled its 3000 seats on holidays. The absence beckons the past to erupt into the present.

But the front third of the building is also a small museum, archival center, set of community offices and synagogue. The prominence of the dome signifies the existence of a living Judaism on German soil. The presence of more than 200,000 Jews and some 90 Jewish communities is a tribute to the steadfast efforts of the Federal Government to induce Jews to return to Germany, and, 73 years after *Reichspogromnacht,* the growth of German Jewry outpaces that of any other Jewish community in Europe. The unending acts of penance by Germans collectively and individually for the Holocaust are unparalleled in modern times, in consequence of which memory no longer suffocates the present.

When Willy Brandt, who had the courage to accept the consequences of history, dropped to his knees spontaneously on December 7, 1970 in Warsaw after laying a wreath at the Nathan Rapaport memorial to the heroes of the Warsaw uprising, one observer commented wryly that "he who had no need to, knelt for all those who did, but never knelt." Since then his countrymen have also come to kneel.

Tuesday, January 29

A Voice Saying Something Right

By David Curzon

Harvey Shapiro, who died on January 7, 2013 at age 88, was a poet of, among many other matters, the worlds of Jewish learning, combat missions in the skies over Nazi Germany, life in Brooklyn and Queens and Manhattan and Jerusalem and Tel Aviv, and the wisdom arrived at through making poetry out of this life. From 1957 to 1995 he worked for the *New York Times;* from 1975 to 1983 he was editor of the newspaper's Book Review. He published eleven books of his own poetry and an anthology, *Poets of World War II.*

His poetry is straightforward, devoid of obscurity, complex syntax or devices of distancing. As he says in an early poem, "Urbanity obscures the mystery," and his concern was the mystery to be found in normal life and captured in plain words. His dedication to simplicity of language puts the reader at risk of underestimating what is being given. Here, for example, in a poem titled "Genesis," is his response to the phrase, "And God saw that it was good:"

> He said it is good
> and we go out
> into it each morning . . . .

This looks completely artless, but who else has given us such a simple and direct application of these grand words of Torah to every day of our lives? Shapiro's reading is the product of a clear mind that goes to the heart of things and a disposition that has no trace of pretentiousness in giving us its insights. As in so many of Harvey Shapiro's poems, these are lines of useable wisdom. They are religious in a way that is compatible with orthodox belief but do not depend on or require faith in anything

other than their own meaning. And the art that conceals art is there in a line-break that highlights the difference between "we go out," in our self-centeredness, and "into it," the vast external world we have inherited and are admonished to appreciate as being good.

And here, in "A Day's Portion," the title poem of a book published in 1994, is his response to the extended description of the Children of Israel collecting the manna in Exodus 16:14-35:

> A day's portion every day,
> gather it is the commandment.

Again, a biblical passage that we all know, and that appears in context to be tied to the supernatural specifics of the Exodus story, is shown in the simplest of language to be applicable to everyday experience. The syntax chosen highlights the injunction to "gather it." The story of the manna, which is presented in the Exodus narrative as a miracle, and which almost no reader understands in a personal way, has been transformed into useable wisdom.

In fact, for Harvey Shapiro the biblical words had the weight of events, as he says in "Ancient Days," an early poem (in which he still capitalizes the first words of each line):

> Great things happened.
> They felt called upon
> To bear witness.
> The words, in themselves,
> Became events.

"Exodus," another early poem, is a commentary on Exodus 13:19, "And Moses took the bones of Joseph with him:"

> . . . Joseph had said,
> God will remember you
> If you take me hence.
> This was before the miracle
> By the sea or the thundering mountain,
> Before the time of thrones
> And cherubim. . . .

But, as the poet tells us in the poem's last lines, relating this seemingly incidental aspect of the Exodus narrative to a central disposition of the rabbinic tradition, "the

remembering" had "already begun."

Among the events Shapiro remembered were his experiences as a gunner of 19 and 20 on B-17 bombing missions against Nazi Germany in World War Two. In a relatively early poem, "Veteran," he remembers by means of a photograph:

I'm close to myself again
In my fifty mission photo—
Poised in leather jacket, parachute harness,
By the twin guns of the bomber—
Breathing now,
Twenty, numb, a survivor.

In every one of those missions, the young man that he was experienced extended stretches of time in which he knew each minute that he might be killed. The details of the trauma entered his poetry only later in life. Thus, in his late poem "War Stories,"

. . . colored tracers would connect bomber
to enemy fighter, and then the black flack
would spread in the sky, a deadly fungus.
Planes would blossom into flame
in that bewildering sky.

And in the poem "Combat,"

. . . I remember particularly the time
I bargained with God—the plane
seemed to be going down,
smoke filled the cabin—
if he would only get me out alive,
I would . . . . What was my promise,
my heartfelt vow?

But for the most part the adult survivor wrote poems of daily life in New York and Israel. These were locations that he felt as if they were words of Torah. In "These Are the Streets," he wrote,

. . . These are the streets of New York, hung
with letters of white fire on black fire.

And in Brooklyn and Queens and Manhattan, he wrote in "Memento Mori," the sun

touches with light the streets and avenues
where you go in search of your life.

New York is, for Harvey Shapiro, a place where the coming of the messiah is discussed in the most mundane of settings, as in "47th Street:"

In the delicatessen
The countermen
Were bantering about the messiah,
Lifting the mounds of corned beef
And tongue. He wouldn't come,
They said, you couldn't
Count on it. Meaning:
They would die in harness.

Israel, where his brother lived, is also a place of revelation in the poem of the same name:

In the desert
even the bare night sky
has its luminosity
as if the dark
were soaked with light.

The rabbinic writings were throughout his life a source of poetry. Here is the poet reflecting on *Pirkei Avot* in "Sayings of the Fathers:"

. . . A listening
For whatever stirs
An intense listening.

The writings of Rabbi Nachman inspired more than one poem, including "Learning:"

. . . Rabbi Nachman's final message:
Gevalt! Do not despair!
There is no such thing as despair at all!
Shouted from the very depths of the heart.

In so many poems, early and late, there are simple lines of meditative wisdom, like those in "Two Cornell Deaths:"

. . . If you walk by the river, Manhattan
is like a book, the pages turn,
the words march down those pages. . . .
Whatever you needed was there, wasn't it?

And in a poem set in his study in "Brooklyn Heights," both title and location, he provides the words that for me characterize the greatness and rarity of the poetry he left us:

. . . Only
now and then a voice cuts through
saying something right . . . .

Wednesday, January 30

Raider of the Lost Knish

By Laura Silver

I took the knish for granted; then it was gone.

More than latkes, matzah or the chopped-apple-and-walnut haroset that crowned the seder plate, knishes were our religion. My family went on Brooklyn-Queens Expressway pilgrimages to Mrs. Stahl's Knishes of Brighton Beach and harbored the findings in our freezer. My parents ushered knishes into the toaster oven and moved magazines to make room on the Saturday afternoon table.

More than Hebrew School, a Torah scroll or the eternal light in the synagogue, the knish provided sanctuary. It encapsulated my identity: ethnic, funny, and grounded in the past.

When my father's mother got a spot in coveted senior housing on the beach a few blocks from Mrs. Stahl's, our lives intermingled with the stuffed dough in a new way. Gramma Fritzie was not a knish baker, but she was a knish consumer extraordinaire. I stocked her icebox at each visit: a half-dozen kasha (buckwheat), to be heated in the toaster oven and served to guests and the parade of international home aides who managed the unpleasant and unmentionable aspects of the aging process. Angie from Trinidad, Paulane from Haiti, and Renate from Russia all became conversant in the ways of my grandmother and in the ways of the knish: one syllable, non-silent K, served with mustard.

I inherited my grandmother's teapot, her popcorn popper and unused Hallmark stationery; but when I really needed to conjure her, I went to Mrs. Stahl's. The store wafted warm and oniony with strains of Yiddish. I took my kasha knish hot and headed for the boardwalk, hoping for an encounter with the spirit of my grandmother. Elderly men in long shorts, earphones and metal detectors scoured the beach; I relied on the knish. I gazed up at the window of apartment 12A of the Scheuer House and imagined Gramma staring down, speaking to me through the steam that emanated from the paper bag.

Mrs. Stahl's became my surrogate grand-

mother. The woman behind the counter was Latina, but that diminished nothing. When my father's Aunt Esther died, my parents and I went to the graveside service on Staten Island, lingered awkwardly and made a beeline for Mrs. Stahl's, for solace and something to stick in our stomachs. We knew her offspring more intimately than Aunt Esther's.

Then she, too disappeared.

For 70 years, Mrs. Stahl's Knishes had stood beneath the elevated subway at Brighton Beach. Then it became a Subway®. Sepia maps of old New York covered the walls of the sandwich franchise and masked the real history the shop embodied. I could not revive Mrs. Stahl's knishes, so I set out to gather facts.

A handful of phone calls led me to Mike Conte, the Vineland, New Jersey pasta maker who purchased Mrs. Stahl's recipe from the shop's final owner. Conte made his kitchen kosher, mixed the dough and filling by machine and finished the knishes by hand. He baked Mrs. Stahl's staple next to his heirloom gnocchi and tortellini and trucked the Ashkenazi pockets to New York where deli cases and bagel shops took them in. Small placards with the Mrs. Stahl's name accompanied each shipment, but no one displayed them.

That was 2005, on my father's side.

In 2008, I landed in Bialystok, Poland for a look at the land of my maternal forebears. I met up with my mother and four of her cousins. The older generation was gone; we were several times removed. It had been decades since we'd seen each other. They lived in New Jersey, we lived in New York.

Our guide took us to the Jewish cemetery of Bialystok. Tomek Wisniewski read Hebrew from the disheveled tombstones and commandeered Cousin Ed to lift one of the toppled monoliths. No luck. We drifted toward the black obelisk that commemorated the pogrom of 1906 (our people left in 1914 and 1920). I admired the shiny, upright graves of the adjacent cemetery, Catholic.

We immersed ourselves in rich hot chocolate and a sauna. The Hotel Branicki (four stars) provided thick white robes and slippers, but no place to hang shock or mourning. I had arrived with visions of a Shabbat dinner with lace curtains that would evoke my mother's mother. Three times I asked Tomek to introduce us to the Jewish community. Three times he said there were only six people, none of whom had been born there. We were five women and one man, all descendants of Max and Celia Levy, buried in Washington Cemetery, Brooklyn. Cousin Ed kept saying that the last name, in Poland at least, had been Czapnik, according to what his father told him. I was not convinced and did not want to argue.

At dusk on our third and final night in Bialystok, my mother's cousin Maxine (named for Max Levy) remembered about the birth certificate. Maxine (she goes by Max) had traveled from San Diego to New York, through Prague and Warsaw, with a large brown duffel bag nicknamed The Beast. Its belly held a Ziploc® bag. The Ziploc® bag held a sheet of beige parchment, decked with official stamps, official seals and official signatures. The sun began its descent. The wall behind the hotel glowed red. Our train was slated for 10 A.M. the next day. Tomek translated: in the town of Knyszyn was born a daughter, Szjena Czapnik (Jean, my grandmother's youngest sister, may she rest in peace, had died two years earlier, in Florida.)

A year later, I landed in Poland with black and white printouts of knishes. Square ones, round ones, fried and baked, split and whole, exposed and encased in aluminum foil. Karol, a Polish Jew and new friend from Warsaw, agreed to be my interpreter. Tomek met us at the Bialystok station. Wooden churches and bales of hay pocked wide fields and a tarp of relentless sky. I expected *Fiddler on the Roof* meets *The Golden Girls* and braced myself for the local Hadassah chapter and the decades-old cholent they would have kept on the stove for just this occasion. "So *you're* the great-niece of Szejna Czapnik? She was a small child, but feisty."

Tomek sent Karol and me to roam the town square, then ushered us into Knyszyn Town Hall to the second-floor office of a Gene Wilder look-alike. The head of public relations for the town glanced at my knish headshots with a good-natured smile. Modern-day Knyszyn has 2,000 inhabitants; before World War II, it had twice that number, half of whom were Jews. The town historian, Henryk Stasciewisz, arrived by bicycle, in a sportscoat. The men purred and sputtered. They asked for Aunt Jean's birth certificate and incanted, "Czapnik." I plucked words from the Polish: *Płacząca* (weeping, as in willow). *Pamiętać* (remember). *Ulica* (street). The men stood and sat, raised their voices and lowered them. They opened books and urged them shut. I stared at the window with its lace curtains and thought: Nana's kitchen.

I saw her get teary over a cutting board, once. She blamed the onions. Nana made kugels with corn flakes, split pea soup and seltzer-fluffy matzoh balls. At the bakery on Jerome Avenue, she bought bowtie cookies, chocolate horns and salt sticks, but Eva Farbstein née Levy never served knishes and never mentioned Knyszyn.

In Knyszyn, Pan Henryk, (we addressed him with the everyday honorific for elders) took Tomek, Karol and me to the graveyard. We parked on the outskirts and unfolded a quick picnic: local beer and a baked roll with vegetable guts. Pan Henryk tucked in his cuffs, turned up his collar and led us through a forest studded with tombstones. We saw markers from the 1700s with Hebrew inscriptions worn to near-oblivion. Ten years before our visit, Tomek, who is not Jewish, transcribed and transliterated names from 700 *matzevot*, or grave markers. My family did not figure in, but the knish did. According to local legend, professional mourners hired to cry at funerals distributed filled pastries to the bereaved, to acknowledge grief and assuage it.

The following year, en route to Knyszyn yet again, I got waylaid at the State Archive in Bialystok. I wrote the Polish words for birth, death and marriage on official state forms. Those forms brought binders, which brought more binders, which brought books of birth records in Cyrillic and a name I had never heard: Riwa Mordkowna (Riva, daughter of Mordechai), alongside one I had tried to ignore, Czapnik. My mother's mother was born with a name, nearly erased; in 1898, not in Bialystok, but in Knyszyn.

I haven't given up on the knish**,** and occasionally bake my own. More important: I'm a direct descendent of Knyszyn, which explains my penchant for wide sky, heavy carbohydrates, and haggling with the past.

Why America's Gaze Has Turned Inward

By Yiftach Ofek

In a recent *New York Times* column, Thomas Friedman expressed his disappointment with not only the Israeli Right but the Israeli Left for brushing aside the peace process with the Palestinians as a "non-issue." He criticized the Right for its arrogance and indifference to U.S. concerns—and the Left for accepting the Right's "dominance" in this sphere while focusing its own efforts on "bringing down housing prices and school class sizes" rather than addressing the most critical matter that Israel needs to face.

With the Israeli elections behind us, it appears that in one way Friedman's fundamental observation was correct. The issue of Israeli-Palestinian peace was much less prominent in this electoral campaign than in previous years. The only party that stressed the centrality of reaching a peace agreement, Tzipi Livni's Hatnua (the "Movement"), gained only six out of the 120 seats in the Israeli Knesset. In contrast, all the other major parties placed their emphasis on social concerns. The Labor Party and newcomer Yair Lapid's Yesh Atid party, which won 15 and 19 seats, respectively, both focused their messages on the plight of the middle class, whose members bear most of the tax burden in Israel and do more than their share of service in the armed forces. The Jewish Home party, under its charismatic new leader, Naftali Bennett, had a resounding success, winning 12 seats; but even Jewish Home, heir to the old pro-settler National Religious Party, concentrated on finding the common denominators between secular and religious Jews. If Likud failed to achieve a corresponding success—indeed, it suffered severe losses—it was mostly on account of another issue of domestic politics: the perception, justified or not, that Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's neo-liberal policies have gone wild and will ultimately hurt the middle classes.

The question that remains, however, is this: why did the peace process become such a marginal issue in Israeli politics? According to Friedman, the reason is that Israelis have gone "blind:" the combination of the Security Fence that protects them against suicide bombers from the West Bank and the Iron Dome that protects them against missiles from the Gaza Strip has convinced them that the Palestinians are no longer a force with which they have to contend. But Friedman is confusing cause and effect. Rather than blaming Israel for shielding itself from enemy threats, he should ask himself why many Israelis have assumed such an inward-looking stance in the first place. The real explanation is the consistent Arab refusal to make the compromises necessary to reach a peace agreement or bring an end to anti-Israel violence.

In recent years, the Palestinian leadership has given Israelis little reason to believe in its sincerity. As Condoleezza Rice notes in her recent memoir, four years ago, when then-Prime Minister Ehud Olmert offered Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas a far-reaching peace proposal, including the cession of more than 90 percent of the West Bank, Abbas's response was a resounding no. Earlier this month, Abbas used the occasion of the 48th anniversary of Fatah's first attack on Israel to "renew the pledge to [our] martyrs" and sing the praises of Haj Amin Al-Husseini, the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem who allied himself with Hitler during World War II. Then there is the Palestinians' ongoing bid for observer status at the United Nations, which looks to most Israelis like an attempt to find a shortcut to statehood that would eliminate the need to make any concessions at all to Israel.

Terrorists are not blowing up buses and cafés in Tel Aviv these days, but the past year has seen rocket attacks on Israeli towns near—and not so near—the Gaza Strip. The Hamas forces that control Gaza repeatedly renew their vow to seek Israel's destruction. Among increasing indications that the Palestinians are preparing for a third Intifada, newspapers report that 88 percent of the population continue to support an armed struggle. Under these circumstances, it is no surprise that the Left, "the peace camp," has found it increasingly difficult to win over the Israeli electorate. "It takes two to tango," goes the oft-quoted idiom—quoted especially often in Israel. Without a reliable partner, the Israeli public seems to have chosen, to paraphrase Billy Idol, to dance with itself.

What Thomas Friedman does not see is that as long as he and others with his views continue to hold Israel responsible for the failure of peace to materialize, regardless of the actions or inaction of the other side, the Palestinians have no reason to change their behavior. In turn, it is because the prospect of peace continues to seem remote that Israelis have become more aware of the other pressing needs with which they must deal, like the secular-religious divide, the middle-class tax burden, and the need to share the responsibility for defending the country more equitably among the different sectors of the population. It is not Israel's increasing inwardness that has diminished the prospects for peace but the diminished prospects for peace that have made Israeli society strive to become more inward-looking and—if the word can ever be used in the Israeli context—normal.