

MAKING GOOD AGAIN

GERMANS TAKE UP THE TORCH
OF JEWISH CULTURE

Jüdisches
Museum



JENNIE ROTHENBERG

THE GERMANIA-JUDAICA LIBRARY in Cologne is where I first meet Monika Wehner, surrounded by books with titles like *Das Volk der Juden*, *Geschichte der Juden in Heidelberg* and *Die Juden in Deutschland*. The auburn-haired 29 year-old is an expert on the history of Germany's lost Jewish communities. Although she's not Jewish, she is also fluent in Aramaic and biblical Hebrew, able to work out fresh translations of Maimonides and compare rabbinical interpretations of Torah verse.

"I think that we Germans are realizing something is missing," reflects Wehner, who earned her M.A at the Martin Buber Institute at the University of Cologne where she now works as a researcher. "A whole culture was destroyed, and people are trying to learn more about what it was and how it shaped Germany."

On the surface of things, this young woman does not have much reason to feel the loss of the German Jews. By the time Wehner was born, there had been few signs of Jewish life in Germany for over 30 years. In fact, it is highly unlikely that Germans of her generation even had an opportunity to befriend a Jew. Only 30,000 Jews, survivors and returnees, lived in Germany between the end of World War II and the demise of the Cold War, their presence barely noticeable among millions of Germans. Even now that Germany's Jewish population has risen above 100,000 thanks to an influx of former Soviet Jews, an American Jewish Committee survey finds that 80 percent of Germans have never met a Jewish person.

While the Soviet Jews may represent a kind of "second coming" of Jewry in Germany, these new immigrants have little connection to the country's centuries-

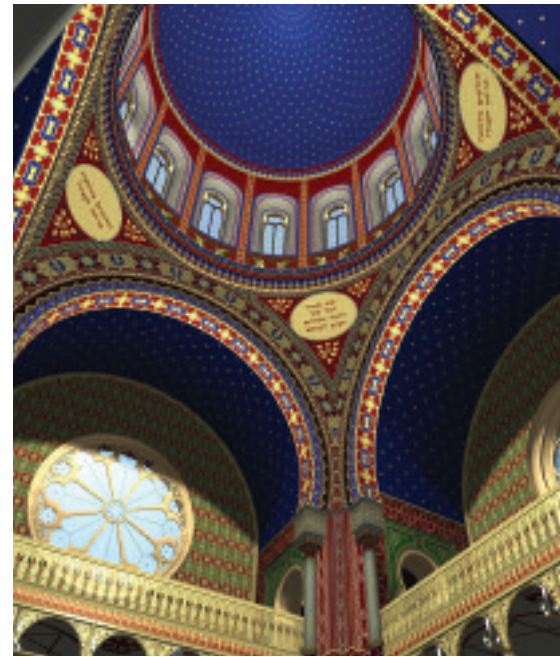
old Jewish civilization. With the last generation of Holocaust survivors fading away, and the very few "old" Jewish families in Germany keeping out of the public eye, non-Jewish Germans like Wehner are very often filling the void.

Monika Wehner speaks with affection of a time when Judaism was woven into the fabric of everyday German life. She introduces me to books about German-Jewish luminaries such as Moses Mendelssohn, Karl Marx, Edmund Husserl and the philosopher for whom the Martin Buber Institute was named.

But when she reaches a row of volumes with titles about the Third Reich, she drops her professional manner. "These are the books that make me very sad, kind of sick," she confesses, peering carefully into my face. "When I read these stories, I can't sleep in the night."

THERE WAS A TIME, NOT SO LONG AGO, when German parents did not like to tell their children what happened to the Jews. Those were the years that the well-known German author Ursula Hegi describes in her 1997 book *Tearing the Silence*: "Born in 1946, I grew up surrounded by evidence of war—bombed-out buildings, fatherless children, men who had legs or arms missing—yet when I tried to ask questions, my parents and teachers only gave me reluctant and evasive answers about the war. Never about the Holocaust."

By the end of the 1960s, Hegi's generation, peers of American baby boomers, had ripped open this silence, confronting the past with a mixture of righteous anger and shame. It was, after all, their own parents who had looked the other way while their Jewish neighbors disappeared. Even as these young German reformers exposed the Nazis' *Verbrechen gegen die*



Stirred to action by the firebombing of a synagogue in Northern Germany, architecture students at the University of Darmstadt created 3D computer models of 18 synagogues destroyed by the Nazis, including those pictured above from Kaiserslautern, Munich and Cologne

Menschlichkeit—crimes against humanity—many of them found it awkward to interact with living Jewish people. In her memoir *Slow Fire*, the Jewish-American writer Susan Neiman, who studied in Berlin, recalls a remark made by a German boyfriend whose parents had belonged to the Nazi party: “Every time I see you, baby, I think of Dachau.”

This burden was not as suffocating for the next generation of Germans. Thanks to their parents, the German education system underwent massive reforms in 1970, ensuring that all questions about the Nazi era would be answered before they were asked. With the help of leading Israeli educators like Chaim Schatzker, the German government designed new textbooks and school curricula that would tell the story of the Third Reich while steering clear of anti-Semitism. That, coupled with the natural passage of time, means that German students and young adults can now talk about Nazis and Jews in a more open and informed way than their parents could.

In Berlin, at an Israeli restaurant adjacent to a 19th century synagogue, I share a falafel platter with 30-year-old David Tschernig who speaks candidly about his grandfather's past. “As long as my grand-

mother lived, she always told me that my grandfather, who died when I was six, was just a normal soldier in wartime who didn't even like to shoot,” says David, his brow furrowed below thinning blond hair. “When she died, I found papers from 1946, written by the American Military Command of Berlin. They wrote that my grandfather was guilty of ‘crimes against humanity and taking part in a genocide.’ He had worked for the Gestapo.” The news was particularly shocking for Tschernig who worked for an organization that sends young Germans to volunteer in Israel. Even so, he says, “it would be a lot harder to say my father was a murderer than to say my grandfather was a murderer.”

Those Germans born during the past 30 years are living during a crucial time in history. In 2005, any German who was at least 20 when World War II ended will be 80 or older, a fact that excuses virtually the whole German society from responsibility during the Nazi era. At its worst, this generational shift has led to rebellion on the part of some German students who refuse to hear yet one more story about suffering Jews. “It would be the same if you studied the French Revolution over and over again,” explains 29-year-old Sandra Hoffman who recently

graduated from the University of Cologne. “You would say, ‘Okay, we've heard this a thousand times, can we do something else now?’”

But others are looking beyond the Jewish victim—the emaciated prisoner with tattooed arm and shorn head—and focusing instead on living Jewish people. The Jewish Museum of Berlin, which opened its doors in September 2001, is pointedly not a Holocaust museum—its subtitle is “Two Millennia of Jewish History.”

The architect Daniel Libeskind designed the Museum to look like a deconstructed Star of David. Its underground entryway branches into three separate paths. The grimmest is lined with a series of empty rooms, called Voids, and culminates in a dead end at the Holocaust Tower. Another leads outside to the Garden of Exile and Immigration. The longest path begins at an old Baroque building and travels to the Stair of Continuity, which in turn leads visitors toward permanent exhibitions about ancient and modern German-Jewish life. The building's message is fractured but clear: Germany's Jews have undergone massive devastation, but Judaism existed long before the Nazi era and will continue on after the last survivors are gone.

ON THE FADED BROWN MAP OF Jewish history, Germany stands apart from every country in the world, and not solely because of the Holocaust. No other nation in Europe had such monumental synagogues and so many thinkers, artists, scientists and entrepreneurs of lasting worldwide fame. All the way back in the 12th century, a Spanish rabbi on a tour of Germany sent starry-eyed reports back home. “There are many Jews in these cities,” penned Rabbi Benjamin of Tudela, “wise and rich people.”

By that time, Jews had been living among German tribes for at least 1,000 years, having settled along the Rhine before Christianity came to Europe. German Jews, known in Hebrew as “Ashkenazim,” made a name for themselves by building world-class yeshivas that attracted brilliant Talmudic scholars, among them the intellectual giant Rashi. In worldlier spheres, German Jews were revered international traders who imported silks from China, blown glass from Italy and perfumes from Persia.

When it came to their Christian neighbors, the Jews of Germany—or rather, the massive bundle of German-ruled lands known as the Holy Roman Empire—lived a strange, dual-edged existence. On the one hand, they were business leaders, coveted by bishops and noblemen who wanted help bolstering their faltering economies. At the same time, they were primary targets of Christian rage. Knights riding off to the Crusades liked to raze Jewish villages along the way, and the practice stuck: the next 700 years were punctuated by accusations, massacres and long periods of exile. In the 13th century, a number of German Jews decided they’d had enough and moved east at the invitation of an ambitious Polish monarch. But a sizeable core of Jews stayed in Germany, moving *en masse* from town to town, erecting synagogues, founding yeshivas and developing their own dialect of Middle High German later to be known as Yiddish. At

YIDDISH BELONGS TO THOSE WHO LOVE IT

Burkhard Seidemann is a charismatic Protestant minister and professional mime with a passion for the works of Isaac Bashevis Singer, Scholem Aleichem and Itzik Manger. “The Nazis murdered the Jews who were the bearers of the culture, but this culture was not murdered,” declares Seidemann, 60, who founded the 99-seat Hackesches Hoftheater in Berlin’s Mitte neighborhood in 1993 and has run it, without a salary, ever since.

This is the neighborhood that Jewish philosopher Moses Mendelssohn once called home. Before the Holocaust, thousands of East European Jewish immigrants, fleeing pogroms and poverty settled here, triggering an artistic, economic and religious renaissance. Today Berlin’s growing Russian Jewish community has rediscovered Mitte, the most fashionable of areas in the former East Berlin.

The renowned New Synagogue has been rebuilt, as has the art-nouveau Hackesche Höfe, originally constructed in 1906. With renovations completed in 1996, eight linked courtyards are now home to boutiques, galleries, restaurants, a cinema—and a theater in which the stories and music of Berlin’s vanished Jewish culture are experiencing a rebirth.

Yiddish culture survives, says Seidemann, in the form of a literature with a unique philosophical stance towards the world, and a sardonic humor in the face of life’s mishaps. “For me personally, it’s a very great discovery,” he explains while sitting in his small office surrounded by bookshelves sagging with collections of Yiddish stories. “And I say that this discovery must be shared with the world.”

As Seidemann talks, his expressive eyes grow wide and his hands flutter elegantly in front of him, a distraction from his mellifluous German. A theatrical polymath, he acts, directs and writes plays. Raised in Weimar, in the former East Germany, Seidemann has 19th-century Jewish ancestry on both sides of his family. “But for me, this is not important,” he says. His outlook is humanistic and universal. “A culture belongs to those who love it.”

From the beginning, Seidemann has worked closely with Jalda Rebling, a leading interpreter of Yiddish and other Jewish musical traditions. Rebling’s Dutch-Jewish mother, Lyn Jaldati, survived Auschwitz and Bergen-Belsen, where she knew both Margot and Anne Frank. Her mother was the first person to break the news of their deaths to Otto Frank, says Rebling.

The theater’s 200 yearly performances are split between klezmer and other Yiddish music concerts, and Yiddish musical plays. Non-Jewish bands such as the well-known Di Grine Kuzine play at the Hackesches Hoftheater as does the clarinetist Helmut Isaac. Rebling particularly admires Isaac. “He says, ‘I am a German musician. I love this music because it is great music,’” she explains.

The theater also produces original Yiddish contemporary works, such as Peter Adrian-Cohen’s well-reviewed *Versteht Sie Mich, Herr Goldfarb*. The show is about a cantor on tour whose pianist becomes ill and must be replaced by a non-Jewish German. It speaks directly to the issues of tolerance and prejudice at the heart of the theater’s mission.

Seidemann rejects criticism that his theater is part of a “Jewish Disneyland,” a cardboard likeness of Old World Jewish life created by non-Jews. Neither does he see the theater as a memorial or a form of reparations, for which he uses the usual term *Widergutmachung* (making good again). “It’s a protest against the effects of the Shoah,” Seidemann says. Playing on words, he adds that it is a way of guaranteeing that Germans must “*nicht wieder Schlect machen*”—never again do evil.—Julia M. Klein



This Yiddish play, *Die Purimspieler*, was performed largely by non-Jewish Germans

HACKESCHES HOF THEATER

the end of the 15th century, they were joined by some of the wealthiest Jewish exiles from the Spanish Inquisition who arrived in Hamburg calling themselves “Portuguese Christians.” In 1612, after earning stellar reputations as doctors, bankers, traders and ship-builders, the Iberians revealed their true identity and were allowed to live in Germany as Jews.

The most glorious period in German Jewish life dawned in the mid-1800s when, inspired by visions of democracy, leaders of each German city gave their Jewish residents full citizenship. Freed of political shackles, the Jewish communities amassed enormous influence and designed the most elegant synagogues Germany had ever known. These houses of worship were attended by scientists like Albert Einstein, writers like Jacob Wassermann and financiers like Carl Fürstenberg, none of whom made any secret of being Jewish. German Jews came to feel so secure that even in June 1933, after Hitler revoked all their rights, the Jewish journal *C.V. Zeitung* declared, “The great majority of German Jews remains firmly rooted in the soil of its German homeland, despite everything.” Two months earlier, an article in the same journal had advised Jews to accept their yellow stars. “This regulation is intended as a brand, a sign of contempt,” the article read. “. . . Jews, take it up, the Shield of David, and wear it with pride!” The last glimmer of that pride disappeared on November 9, 1938, when Hitler Youth raged through the countryside and burned 101 synagogues to the ground.

Nearly 60 years later, Marc Grellert, a non-Jewish architecture student at the University of Darmstadt near Frankfurt, found himself thinking of those synagogues after Neo-Nazis firebombed a synagogue in a northern German town. Frankfurt had been home to some of Germany’s most impressive Jewish buildings including the massive Börneplatz synagogue, built in 1882 with arched windows, towering pillars and space for 1,280 wor-



A German guide leads a youth group through the memorial marking the site of the Dachau concentration camp

shippers. Grellert approached his professor, Manfred Koob, with an idea: could a group of architecture students work together to create three-dimensional computer reconstructions of synagogues destroyed in the Nazi era?

Koob had already made a name for himself in the new field of virtual reconstruction. In 1989, he had used computer technology to create the first lifelike model of a historic building: the Church of Clouny, destroyed during the French Revolution. But Koob, a member of an older, more guilt-riddled German generation, was intimidated by Grellert’s proposal. “The question I put to myself, born in 1949, was whether we, as non-Jews, could undertake such a project,” he wrote me in a long, soul-searching email. “Perhaps we would be doing something sacrilegious, something not permitted in the Jewish faith. How would our work be received by Holocaust survivors? How would the Jewish community respond, in Germany and abroad?” Along with this litany of doubts, Koob added, “I was aware that it would be a sorrowful journey through German history, because reconstructing a building also means exploring its destruction.”

Koob need not have doubted. The project quickly attracted international acclaim, including an exhibition at the Jewish Diaspora Museum in Israel earlier this year. By that time, the initiative had grown to encompass 18 synagogues and 60 students. The students began each reconstruction by locating that syna-



Two young Germans listen respectfully to the stories of Walter Joelsen, a Holocaust survivor living in Munich

gogue’s blueprints in archives across Germany. Next they sketched out two-dimensional drawings of walls, arches and bimas. From there, they began rebuilding the synagogue on the computer, stone by stone. Some of the details came from photographs or other historical sources. Although virtual synagogues have obvious limitations—they cannot stand as landmarks on street corners or hold crowds of worshippers—Koob thinks of them as “symbolic indications of what once was.”

For Marc Grellert, the most powerful phase in the process was sitting down with Jewish survivors. “Some cities in Germany have programs every year where they invite back the Jewish people who once lived there,” he explains. “We went to those meetings and actually brought a computer so we could sit there with them.” Pulling up an image on the screen, Grellert and his fellow students would ask, “Did this part of the building look that way?” The German Jew who once prayed there would peer at the screen and shake her head. “No, no, those curtains weren’t red—try coloring them blue.” Dutifully, the students would alter the image until a light came over the old woman’s face and she would say, “Yes, this is it. This is how I remember my synagogue.”

FOR THOSE WHO WANT TO FEEL HOPEFUL about Germany’s future, stories like those of Wehner and Grellert are not difficult to find. All

across the country, through schools, universities and private organizations, Germans are making an effort to learn about Judaism and taking steps to strengthen it. Programs such as Action Reconciliation enable young Germans to volunteer at the Anne Frank House in Amsterdam or work in Jewish nursing homes in the United States. There are organizations like North German Youth in International Community Service whose members have rebuilt a real-life synagogue in the town of Röbel. In addition to the Martin Buber Institute, there are Jewish study programs at the Universities of Heidelberg, Frankfurt, Munich, Tübingen and Berlin. Popular klezmer bands like Harry's Freilach are made up of non-Jewish musicians and Jewish theater is directed and acted by non-Jews (see sidebar).

That's not to say that no Jews are active in Germany's Jewish scene—with the surge in Eastern-European immigration, Berlin in particular is now home to a tangible Jewish community. But three generations after the Holocaust, most German Jews still prefer not to draw attention to themselves. At the same time as non-Jewish Germans throw widely publicized Jewish music festivals, a Jewish-owned kosher food store called Schalom in Berlin's Charlottenburg district promises its clientele that it is tucked away in an inner courtyard "for discreet shopping." In the words of Paul Spiegel, president of the Central Council of Jews in Germany, "Nobody can see us. We have no influence on the economy, on culture, on science. We do not play a role." The son of Holocaust survivors, he

does not blame his fellow German Jews for laying low. "Just consider this medical analogy," he offers. "If someone previously suffered from pneumonia, people take note of even the slightest cough."

There are coughs to take note of, ones that have made headlines across the Atlantic. For this reason it may come as a surprise to Americans that many young Germans are carrying the torch of Jewish culture. More typically, the words "German youth" bring a different image to mind: the Neo-Nazis, whose red flags and xenophobic slogans have cast a shadow across Germany. In truth, right-wing extremists make up a tiny percentage of German youth, but the trend is most troublesome in the former East Germany. The Communists and the Nazis were bitter enemies—an anti-Hitler election poster in the Museum of the German Resistance shows a man with a Soviet-style hammer crushing a squirming swastika. After the war, when the East German schools presented their version of the Nazi era, Jews were largely erased from the picture.

For Ingo Hasselbach, an East Berlin native who helped found the Neo-Nazi movement during the 1980s, hating the Jewish people was requisite but secondary to rebelling against the Communist establishment. "For me," Hasselbach wrote in his book *Führer-Ex*, "the Jews had never been a great theme. They were the central enemy in my belief system, but I hadn't really had any contact with them; I fused my vision of the socialist state, with which I'd had ample experience and which I hated, with my vision of Jews."

In a Berlin office building, a few blocks east of where the Wall once stood, I discuss the Neo-Nazi phenomenon with Jörg Lau, a writer for the German weekly *Die Zeit*. Lau, who at 39 is Hasselbach's peer, contrasts modern Neo-Nazis with Hitler Youth. The original Nazis were impeccably turned-out young men, groomed by the state to be paragons of their generation, he points out. The Neo-

Outside Berlin's most prominent synagogue, Germans hold a sign that reads, "We love our Jewish citizens! No anti-Semitism."



Nazis tend to be angry social outcasts who scrawl slogans on walls and fly in the face of authority. Reflecting on young Germans who listen to loud, distorted music at Neo-Nazi festivals, Lau shakes his head in mock disapproval and remarks, “Göbbels would not have been pleased.”

The Neo-Nazi phenomenon didn’t crumble with the Berlin Wall—it intensified as young easterners, living without a Communist safety net, railed against unemployment and poverty. Nevertheless, their ideology has not poisoned the German mainstream. If anything, the presence

its longstanding special relationship with Israel. In Germany, as elsewhere, criticizing Israeli policy is not necessarily equivalent to anti-Semitism, but given the Holocaust and the positive post-war relationship between Germany and Israel, these criticisms are worth watching.

Over the last half century, Germans have poured \$30 billion into the Jewish State. Chancellor Konrad Adenauer, who signed a reparations agreement with Israeli leaders in 1952, knew that every third citizen of Israel had suffered Nazi persecution. What better way to atone

particularly harsh terms. “Israel is an artificial country,” he told me. “It was formed artificially, and it will cease to exist.” In light of his own country’s history, he added, he simply could not accept any nation that survived by oppressing others. His viewpoint drove home a poignant fact: the once tight bond between German and Israeli youth has begun to dissolve. Until 2000, the German government spent \$2 million each year to send German youth to Israel. Of the young Germans I’ve met who are taking part in Jewish causes, an overwhelming number visited Israel during their teenage years. These exchange programs all but came to a halt with the Second Intifada, when fearful parents didn’t want their children traveling to Israel anymore.

All the same, the ghostly presence of concentration camps and Hitler rallies is

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of extremists in their own generation is the strongest force keeping young Germans tied to their country’s history. As Marc Grellert’s story shows, a German student may feel little connection with *Kristallnacht*, but a modern-day attack on a Jewish synagogue is a call to heroic action.

These days, Jewish leaders are often as concerned about the far left as the far right. Rebecca Neuwirth of the American Jewish Committee, who lived in Germany during the 1990s, has noticed a kind of “reflux reaction” in the past few years. Ever since the country’s unification, she says, “some of the younger Germans have had this sense that Germany should be a normal country again. And one of the ways to become normal is not to have this massive burden of guilt, not to be the country that always lays low in foreign policy so as not to scare everyone.”

Some German leftists, angry about current Israeli policies, have alarmed the international Jewish community by calling for the German government to end

than to help the new country grow? The six million Jewish victims could not be resurrected, but the Jewish State had concrete needs: an army, an expanding network of highways and power grids and, with time, major universities. Germany threw its support behind all of these. During the Gulf War alone, the German government sent \$900 million to Israel, including \$167 million for humanitarian aid and \$730 for the military. On the research front, Germany has given Israeli institutions \$363 million in government grants, and private German foundations have put in hundreds of millions more. In the political arena, Germany has long been Israel’s most vocal supporter in the European Union.

Knowing this, I was startled during my travels when a German acquaintance of mine condemned the Jewish State in

not ready to dissipate. At a sidewalk café in Berlin, I ask Henryk Broder, Germany’s most famous Jewish journalist, whether today’s young Germans will be the generation that finally leaves history behind. He answers me in riddles. “So many people are coming over here with the same question you’re asking: is the past over?” He leans across the table. “You know what? No. Simply because whatever you do, wherever you go, whatever you touch, the past is always present in Germany. And the past is the only thing that has some future in Germany.” He grins enigmatically. “The past has a great future. A giant future.”

AT 8:30 ON A HOT JULY MORNING, I join a group of young Belgians trudging through the Dachau concentration camp. Simone Ewert, a 29-year-old

NEVERTHELESS, THEIR IDEOLOGY HAS NOT POISONED THE GERMAN MAINSTREAM.

German, is leading the tour. She wears a sleeveless white shirt and a khaki skirt, her blond ponytail pulled through the back of a baseball cap. Walking the dusty brown roads, Ewert points out barracks, barbed wire fences, a gas chamber built too late to be used. She lingers at an iron gate with the inscription *Arbeit macht frei*—Work will make you free.

“Think of the prisoners here,” she entreats the Belgians. “Every day they had to read these words, knowing that their only chance of freedom might be leaving this life.”

Ewert, who graduated from high school in Dachau, has had a special affinity for the Jewish people since she met Max Manheimer, a German Holocaust survivor who visited her school and who, as she affectionately points out, bears a striking resemblance to David Ben Gurion. She has gotten to know Manheimer and other Jewish Holocaust survivors through the International Youth Meeting in Dachau, a summer program founded in 1983.

Despite the horrors its name evokes, Dachau is a peaceful Bavarian village with pointed Teutonic rooftops. When my train rolled into the station, a row of murals urged me to visit the town’s historic attractions: the Dachau Castle, built by a Renaissance duke; the Parish Church of St. Jacob with its “splendid 18th century sundial”; and the local art gallery, featuring the works of celebrated Dachau landscape painters. Only one panel announced the attraction that draws millions of international visitors to this small German village: the memorial site of the first-ever Nazi concentration camp.

“For a long, long time, the people of Dachau have tried to put aside this history,” explains Ewert, who has helped lead the International Youth Meeting since 1995. “But that attitude has started to change in the past five to ten years. People here are realizing that they don’t get a positive media response when they

try to separate themselves from what happened during the Nazi era.”

As a German, Ewert feels a special responsibility to educate young people from European countries where right-wing youth movements are on the rise and lessons from the Holocaust are less palpable. In general, she and her German peers recoil from nationalism. They pride themselves on embracing other cultures by trekking the Himalayas, collecting African art or learning to salsa dance. For most young Germans, nothing could be less seductive than the Nazi rallying cry of *Ein Volk! Ein Reich! Ein Führer!* Even the author Daniel Goldhagen, who famously inculcated the whole Nazi-era German population in *Hitler’s Willing Executioners*, concluded his second book *A Moral Reckoning* by asserting, “Germans have replaced core doctrines of racism, anti-Semitism, and hatred with the Enlightenment doctrines of universalism, tolerance, and the desire for peace.... Except among fringe elements, Nazism is dead. It will not be resurrected.”

Dachau’s International Youth Meetings, which started with a cluster of tents alongside Dachau’s lake, are now so popular that the city opened a youth hostel in 1998. They have grown to encompass all kinds of events, from visits by former Neo-Nazis to speeches by Dachau’s city leaders. But the most meaningful part of the program is invariably the discussion with a Jewish Holocaust survivor. “Each year, you see that these people get older and older,” Ewert says. “But I know their stories. When I translate them, sometimes I know that this and this will follow. Nevertheless, I want to listen again. It’s a very special thing each time.”

Late in the afternoon, Ewert introduces the young Belgians to Nikolaus Lehner, an 80-year-old Jewish man with bristly gray hair, tanned skin and almond-shaped eyes. Lehner was interned at Dachau in 1944 after hiding from the Nazis in Budapest. Oddly enough, after the Americans liberated Dachau, Lehner

remained in the town—and never left. At first, he and his wife intended to leave Germany altogether. After a while, it became clear that they were going to live and work and most likely die in Dachau.

Sitting in a circle of chairs around Lehner, the Belgians listen attentively but remain silent while a few young Germans ask questions. One 18-year-old girl with pale blond hair wants to know whether Lehner was on good terms with his parents when he saw them for the last time. Someone else asks whether life in Germany has been difficult since 1945. “You get attached to a society,” he shrugs. “The only thing is that I find it hard to believe in God.”

Lehner speaks gently, although his words are laced with bitterness—bitterness at the death of his family, at the loss of his faith, at his inability to leave the place where he spent the most harrowing period of his life. But he breaks into a smile when I, the only other Jewish person in the room, join in with a question of my own: what does he think of Germany’s young generation?

“It’s a shame I don’t believe in God anymore,” he says, almost apologetically. “I would say that all of this is God’s will—this youth hostel, these meetings, these young people sitting here, wanting to learn. You know, the government offers us these reparations.” He uses the German term *wiedergutmachung*, which sounds more naïve than the English word “reparations”—it literally means “making good again.”

“It’s shameful to think that this little bit of money could make up for what happened to us,” he continues. “But what these young people are doing here—this is the real *wiedergutmachung*. It’s a more productive spiritual way, a human way.”

At the end of his lecture, Lehner rises and faces the group. “*Auf wiedersehen*,” he says as he moves toward the door.

Everyone replies, “*Auf wiedersehen*,” even the Belgians. But the German girl with the pale blond hair says, “Shalom.”