

Remembrance and Hope: Boston Rabbis Encounter Modern Germany

Growing up in New York in the 1970s I remember shopping for school supplies. Scissors were on the list so I chose the best pair I could find and showed it to my mother. Quietly, but forcefully, she shook her hand and said, “No, you can’t get those; put them back.”

“Ema, why?!”

“They were made in Germany.”

That was it. All things from Germany were *verboten*. That’s how I first felt the intensity of the *Shoah*. Because I internalized that, I never wanted to go to Germany. While I led several trips to Poland and Israel where we encountered the devastation the Nazis wrought upon the largest Jewish community in Europe, I had no interest in visiting Deutschland.

And while I have been aware of the great support that Germany has given to the State of Israel and its other efforts to repair the world in recent times, I still had no interest in visiting.



That all changed a year ago when, as president of the Massachusetts Board of Rabbis (MBR), I received a call from the new German Consul General for New England: Dr. Ralf Horlemann. He wanted to meet with the MBR leadership, together with a special governmental minister from Berlin.

At Hebrew College a few rabbis met the Consul General and the Special Representative for Relations with Jewish Organizations, Issues Relating to Anti-Semitism, and Remembering the Holocaust: Ambassador Felix Klein.

Meeting with the Consul General (who is with us this morning!



Barukh Haba – welcome – *willkommen*) and Dr. Klein, who, incidentally, is not Jewish, was transformative. They described a small, but vibrant, German Jewish community and the efforts the German government takes to sustain



Jewish institutions. The simple fact that there is a government minister whose portfolio includes Jewish communities within Germany and beyond, combating Anti-Semitism, and remembering the *Shoah* made an impact.

Dr. Klein mentioned that in the summer of 2015, the Maccabi Games that brought together 12,000 young Jews from all over the world, were held in the Olympic stadium that Hitler had built for the 1936 Olympics; then, of course, Jews were barred from competing.

A month later the Consul General reached out to me and told me that he would like to bring a group of Boston rabbis to Germany as guests of the German government. Given all that I had learned already, I was receptive to the idea.

When we discussed it, he did not yet have approval for the funds so it seemed a long way off. But then I got another call from the Consul General telling me that the trip was approved.

I said: “Great, I’ll get a group for 2017!”

Dr. Horlemann said, “No, we are going this summer!”

“OK.”

Thankfully, in just a few weeks, I was able to bring together an amazing group of 12 regional rabbis – men and women, Reform, Conservative, and Orthodox, representing many different communities, including Temple Israel in Boston, Hebrew College, Temple Emanuel, Hebrew Senior Life and many more.



The group gathers at Logan Airport before departing for Munich. Top row, (from left): Rabbi Sara Paasche-Orlow, Rabbi Joseph Polak, Rabbi Andrew Vogel, Rabbi Michelle Robinson, Rabbi Ron Fish, Ralf Horlemann, consul general of Germany in Boston, Rabbi Braham David, Rabbi Ronne Friedman, Rabbi Benjamin Samuels. Bottom row, (from left): Rabbi Laurence Bazer, Rabbi David Lerner. (Rabbis Daniel Lehmann and Victor Reinstein met the group in Germany.)

We named the trip [“Remembrance and Hope: A Journey of Boston Rabbis to Germany”](#) since we wanted it to include both understanding and reflecting on the past, the *Shoah*, as well as the hope of today’s Jewish community. We also wanted to explore how Germany was working with immigrants, especially refugees from places like Syria. Together, we

designed an itinerary and spent the most amazing week together in Munich and Berlin.

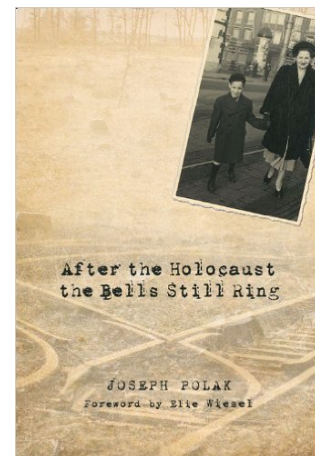
Now, there's lots to say about the trip – it's not everyday that 12



rabbis from different movements get to spend this kind of quality time together – not to mention the jogs I got to go on with the Consul General through Beer Gardens in Munich and the delicious beer and excellent kosher and vegetarian food we consumed – but today, I want to share about some of the deeper experiences.

In preparation for the trip I re-read the *Diary of Anne Frank* to bring me back to those narratives. While I had led USY trips to Poland and Israel in the 1990s where we explored the *Shoah*, it had been 20 years; I wanted to reconnect myself with the depth of that terrible event.

I also read a new book by Rabbi Joseph Polak entitled: *After the Holocaust, the Bells Still Ring*. Rabbi Polak was a CHILD survivor, who endured these unimaginable tortures at a very young age – he and his mother managed to survive, while his father was killed. After becoming an Orthodox rabbi, he led the BU Hillel for several decades before his retirement. Part memoir, part poetry, part *midrash*, this book took me on an unbelievable journey into how the suffering for survivors never leaves them. He joined us on the trip and was an amazing



resource. When [he chanted the *El Malei Rahamim*, the memorial prayer](#) (scroll down to the video) in Dachau, the tears flowed for all of us.

Sara Paasche-Orlow, the rabbi of Hebrew Senior Life, who has many connections to Germany, wrote that after we entered Dachau from modern Germany, “we stepped into a zone where there were no more piles of bodies visible but the groans and cries were just under the surface. My family who were political prisoners (here) [in Dachau] shared tight quarters, lice, and unimaginable brutality – this place where humiliating and terrorizing practices were developed for all the camps. Time passes and truth stays still.”



Another colleague, Rabbi Victor Reinstein, wrote the following after our experience visiting Dachau:

“It had rained most of the day. The rain would do what I could not bring myself to do. I had never cleaned off the dust of Dachau that had caked onto my shoes the previous day. I couldn’t bring myself to remove that dust, not wanting my shoes to ever be cleansed of their encounter with that place. I did not want to clean my shoes, to remove the residue of that earth of sand and ash, of blood and tears, sodden and dry, too fertile and ever fallow. The rain began the process I could not begin myself, cleansing rain that cleaned my shoes, God’s tears

that had begun to fall after I placed a stone at the ovens and stepped outside, *mayyim hayyim*/waters of life.

As I wanted to leave the dust on my shoes, I have wanted to hold the pure emotion felt at Dachau, to hold it in all of its pain and release, never to let go of those for whom I cried, to feel the catharsis of hot tears streaming down my face. It is the feeling of not wanting to leave *Shivah*, refusing to go out from the house of mourning, wanting to remain close in time and place to the dead. But we have to go on. We continue on the path of life as a journey of remembrance and hope.”



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And so, we did. We moved on to the hope, aware of the fact that Germany has accepted its responsibility and even Germans who are generations removed from these horrors – the worst and largest scale of crimes against humanity ever committed – understand their challenging history of Anti-Semitism.

Today, Germany stands as a beacon for new immigrants and has a struggling, but rejuvenated Jewish community that we were eager to see.

That is not to say that it does not still bear its burdens of the past. It does and we will remember the horrors it inflicted upon the world, upon our people, upon our families, and even upon us forever.

Today, we understand that there can be epigenetic trauma; trauma that can be heritable and cause changes in our genes that continue to be passed down to future generations. The Jewish people as a whole passes down “memories,” fear and phobias about the *Shoah*. This causes pain and anxiety that can be triggered by events in our world today: terrorism, Orlando, Dallas, Minneapolis, et cetera....

But, as we moved from remembrance to hope, we experienced the complexities of modern Germany, appreciating the nuances and the layered picture, but we did so together. We saw the amazing Jewish community center and synagogue in Munich; we ate at Einstein’s kosher restaurant. We visited Jewish institutions, museums and memorials in Berlin, while learning about the three rabbinical school programs – Orthodox, Reform and Conservative that exist there today.

We saw that the city has had a huge influx of tens of thousands of Israelis who have come for Berlin’s cosmopolitan Tel-Aviv-like inclusivity, along with greater affordability. We spoke with people involved with reconciliation, interfaith dialogue among Jews, Christians, and Muslims and [schools that devote themselves to remembering the *Shoah*](#). Throughout our trip, we saw “Stolpersteine,” literally, “stumbling stones” – small brass squares that are installed in the sidewalk in front of a home of a German

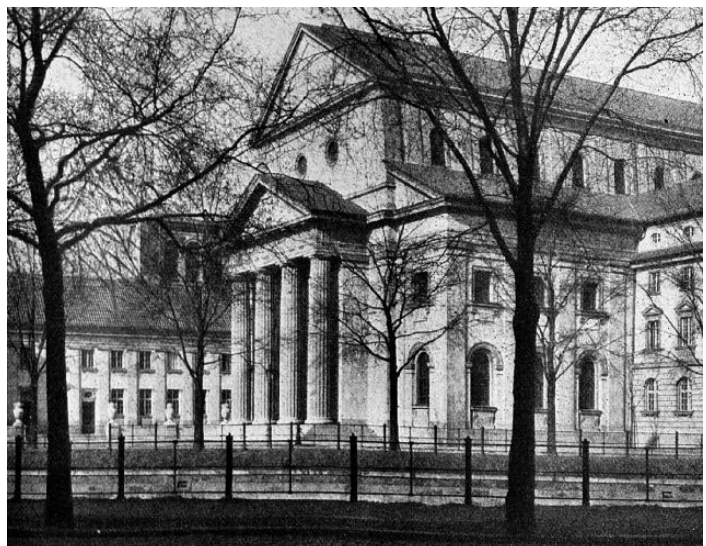
Jew who lived there until the Nazis came. These brass inscriptions provide the name of the Jew who lived in that particular home, his or her date of birth, date of deportation by the Nazis and where they were deported to



– for example, “Theresienstadt” or “Auschwitz,” and then it says, “murdered” and the date. There are already more than 55,000 of these Stolpersteine installed throughout Germany.

When our group met with students in a vocational high school in Berlin, the Ruth Cohn School, they all spoke about seeing these “Stolpersteine;” one young woman spoke about how she always stops to read them to learn the actual names of the Jews who were murdered by the Nazis. She said: “It helps her understand her responsibility.” This project has helped make the Holocaust serve not just as an abstract history lesson, but has made it more real for an entire generation of regular Germans who now feel a moral obligation to tell its stories.

For Shabbat, I was able to attend three different synagogues. On Friday night, two other rabbis and I took



bicycles (it was still before sunset) and biked across Berlin (it is a bike-friendly city) so that we could support a smaller synagogue: [The Fraenkelufer Shul](#).

We arrived just as services were starting and quickly locked up our rented bikes. It was not a large building and we went in to find them in the middle of the *davening*. There were about 25 people – half men and half women; it was a Conservadox synagogue with men and women sitting separately, but without a *mehitzah*, a divider. Many of the people were not able to follow the Hebrew prayers, some came from Russian backgrounds and some were in the process of studying and converting to Judaism. It felt nice that our voices could strengthen their *tefillah* (prayer) and we followed some of the sermon, which was in German with some Hebrew.

After services, we stopped at the signpost explaining the history of the synagogue and then we could see that the main building had been destroyed on Kristallnacht; in fact, when you watch videos of that terrible night (in Germany, they call it Pogromnacht – the night of the Pogrom) you see this massive 2,000 seat *shul* that was burned down. All that was left was the educational wing and the chapel, which is where we *davened*. Our bikes were on a little cobblestone street off a canal that you can see in some of the pictures from 1938.

That left an impression.

We saw and experienced even more than I could have imagined. The highs were higher and the lows were lower than I expected. We saw a thriving country, one that spent a good deal of time and thought processing its past. And we were also aware of its current challenges: [a growing](#)

[right-wing nationalist element](#) and a Muslim population that will hopefully not become radicalized as it has in France.

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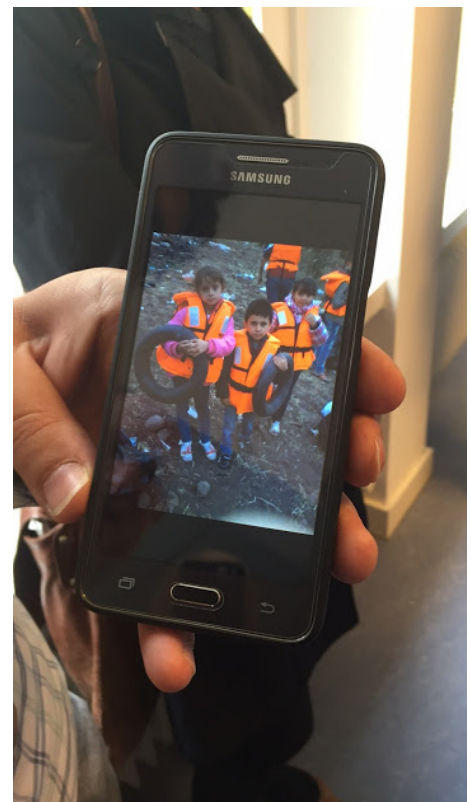
We gather today on Yom Kippur, our day of atonement. While our biblical texts narrate a passive experience where the *Kohein HaGadol*, the High Priest performed rituals and the people simply fasted and were forgiven, by rabbinic times, the notion of *teshuvah* and *mehilah* – of asking each other for forgiveness had taken root. The Mishnah, our basic code of Jewish law from 220 C.E. states that, while the prayers and rituals of Yom Kippur help us atone for our transgressions between ourselves and God, this day has no power to help us be forgiven for the wrongs we have done to each other, until we go and ask each person for forgiveness.

By medieval times, Maimonides delineates the steps we must take when asking another person for *mehilah*, for forgiveness. It begins with regret – internally, we must feel badly about what we done. Second, we are supposed to go up to the person we have wronged and explicitly state what we have done wrong . Not easy to do for certain, but vitally important. Third, we say we are sorry. That's also hard – it should be done with eye contact and honest and deep feeling. Reconciling can be emotionally challenging, but it can heal. Fourth, we have to make amends; sometimes, we have to make it up to someone in a concrete way by buying something or taking another action to rectify matters; this step includes that. Finally, *teshuvah* cannot be complete until we resolve never to repeat that action or speak those words again. Ideally, that means that when we are faced with the same opportunity, we choose differently.

Now, those are the traditions between one person and another – and we should all perform those each time we do something wrong; if there are folks with whom you have not yet done that today; you still have another six hours or so and we will leave a little break in the afternoon so you can. But, what about a wrong on the magnitude of the *Shoah* – how can a nation apologize to another nation? How can the children and grandchildren and great-grandchildren apologize to the survivors and their offspring?

Well, they can and they have. More than any other country involved in the *Shoah*, Germany has done the work of *teshuvah*. Now, we might say that as the masterminds of this horror, they should and that seems fair; but, they have taken responsibility – not just apologizing, but paying reparations to Israel and Jews around the globe and most of all, we see it in how they now behave, how they have resolved to act differently – both towards Jews and towards others who are strangers in their midst: the immigrants.

On Friday afternoon, we visited an immigrant center where Syrian refugees were being housed. We met Mr. Masri from Aleppo who told us of his hellish experience. Assad's government bombed his house (they were lucky, they were in the other half of it at the time) and then he had to take his wife and three young children on the most harrowing journey across the sea to Turkey and from there trek from



country to country, finally making it to Germany. Taking out his cell phone, he showed us pictures where we could see their suffering. He both described the trauma his family endured and the welcome and caring embrace that Germany had given them. He and his children were learning German, studying, given housing, food, and many other needs; he was looking forward to rebuilding their life there. It's weird – since I had heard of these stories before, his was not new, but there was something about shaking his hand and looking into his eyes and at the pictures on his phone that made it much more real, much more powerful.

Showing great political courage and vision, Germany's Prime Minister Angela Merkel said that "Germany had an obligation [to act]...because of...the burdens of its past."

The conversation about refugees and immigrants in our country has been shameful. Out of the millions of people in need, our great country has mustered the will to welcome only 10,000. It's embarrassing. And now, the debate is about whether we can bring in 50-65,000. Let's look at Germany and other countries and see how they act.

We remember how some of our own people seeking refuge here during WWII were turned away only to be murdered back in Europe. We know we should and can do better. The comments about turning them all away due to terrorism is simply absurd. If we were really worried about every danger, maybe we could start by having mandatory background checks on all gun sales....

[President Obama spoke eloquently](#) about this issue at the UN a few weeks ago; he said:

We can learn from a young boy named Alex, who lives [not far from here] in Scarsdale, New York. Last month, like all of us, Alex saw that heartbreaking image – five-year-old Omran Daqneesh in Aleppo, Syria, sitting in that ambulance, silent and in shock, trying to wipe the blood from his hands.



And here in New York, Alex, who is just six years old, sat down and wrote me a letter. And he said, he wanted Omran to come live with him and his family. “Since he won’t bring toys,” Alex wrote, “I will share my bike and I will teach him how to ride it. I will teach him addition and subtraction. My little sister will be collecting butterflies and fireflies for him...We can all play together. We will give him a family and he will be our brother.”

Those are the words of a six-year-old boy; he teaches us a lot.

The humanity that a young child can display, who hasn’t learned to be cynical, or suspicious, or fearful of other people because of where they’re from, or how they look, or how they pray, and who just

understands the notion of treating somebody that is like him with compassion, with kindness – we can all learn from Alex.

And how we treat refugees today says a tremendous amount about us.

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As I have reflected on this amazing experience and what it meant to me, there is one other moment that stands out. It took place on Shabbat morning. While our hotel was in what had been West Berlin, the Conservative synagogue that many of us wanted to attend was in the former East Berlin, so we walked three miles through the center of this beautiful city.

[The Oranienburger Strasse Synagogue](#)

is housed in what was the Neue Synagogue, new 150 years ago when it was built; its main sanctuary could hold 3,200 people. Although it was destroyed by the war, the gorgeous entrance building with classrooms, offices, and a museum have been beautifully restored. Rabbi Gesa Ederberg heads this egalitarian community with great skill and dedication.



We *davened* in the upper rear balcony, facing a wall of glass,



overlooking the footprint of where the main synagogue had stood; they left



the footprint. It was a surreal experience to be in a room with about 250 seats overlooking the emptiness, what had been destroyed, and appreciating the magnitude of the loss.

But, it was even more intense than that since the Shabbat we were there, there was a *Bar-Mitzvah* and it was the grandson of Rabbi Ismar

Schorsch, the former chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary. Rabbi Schorch's son Jonathan is a professor at the University of Potsdam so the family relocated to Berlin. His grandson *leyned* the entire *parashah* beautifully and offered a thoughtful *dvar* Torah.

And then Ismar Schorsch spoke in German and English about his family; how his family had lived in Germany – his grandfather ran a Jewish boarding school. And how his grandfather was murdered by the Nazis in 1943. That was two generations before him. And then he looked at his grandson – two generations into the future, back in Germany, taking his place as an adult Jew. We all could not help but cry as we felt the rebirth of our people, as we moved from remembrance to hope.



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Thank you to Germany for performing *teshuvah* after committing the worst crimes in human history, thank you to the Consul General for reaching out in friendship to build a new bridge between our countries and peoples, thank you to all those who care for the *ger*, the stranger, the immigrant, the person in need in our world.

May we all remember the six million, the horrors of the *Shoah* and be inspired by Germany's *teshuvah* to treat immigrants and all those who are on the fringes with decency, respect, and kindness. May this healing be a

model for all of us to perform *teshuvah* as individuals and as a community.
May we all move from tears to action, from remembrance to hope.

G'mar Hatimah Tovah – may we all be sealed for a year of blessing
and forgiveness.