

Anti-Semitism is a problem for every Christian. For someone born in Germany the problem is magnified many times over, even when/if she identifies herself as Marxist, atheist, or, as they say in Germany where I currently visit, "unaffiliated." When some long-time acquaintances make no secret of their stance as Holocaust-deniers, the inner conflict intensifies--a conflict that began months earlier, with decisions of whom to visit, where to go, what conversations to entertain.

I have known "Elke" since I was a teenager whose mother lay dying of cancer. Back then Elke's family provided refuge and comfort. They enveloped me in family singing, music making, and Sunday-afternoon coffee hour for which the lady of the house baked wholesome cakes. The hateful literature they gave me was another matter. One book stands out in my mind: it featured horrid scenes of torture inflicted on German women in Poland as the WWII tide turned and the German occupiers were thrown off. I did not know much of recent German history, but even then I understood that very likely the occupying forces had themselves inflicted the atrocities. When Elke mentioned that her parents gave her the book to read when she turned fourteen, I decided the ties to her family were too problematic to maintain. I left my country soon after, first to spend a year in France, later to immigrate to the U.S.

Eventually I resumed contact with Elke. Her teen daughter spent a summer with my family in California. My sons traveled with her son in Germany. Eventually I made the acquaintance of her husband in Germany. It became clear, his mindset was similar to that of Elke's parents, now deceased--and to Elke's own, for that matter.

Not many German Jews survived the Nazi years, yet some did. They were joined, after the collapse of the Reich, by some ten thousand German Jews who returned to their country from exile. A steady trickle of refugees from the Eastern Block augmented their ranks, for the Soviets made life hard for Jews. With the collapse of the Soviet regime the trickle swelled to a steady stream, attaching itself to the small Jewish communities where the easterners could learn German, obtain status as documented workers, and become acquainted with a westernized lifestyle. So it is that German cities that once were centers of Jewish learning--cities like Mainz, Speyer, Worms, Berlin--once again feature newly-built synagogues. To the dismay of orthodox Jews from the East, some of these feature women rabbis and religious services that might be termed liberal. And once again, their neighbors look on with ill will and a certain amount of envy.

Hate speech is against the law in Germany. Countless organizations work to counteract skinheads and neo-Nazis. Others actively seek to further understanding between Germans and their German-Jewish coevals. Elke's husband assured me that the things he was telling me "in confidence" would get him into trouble, were he to utter them publicly. Yet he owns a vast library of books with titles like "The Betrayal of Germany." Conspiracy theories are alive and well in Germany. Indeed, Elke's husband seems convinced of inevitable financial meltdown drifting into Germany from the U.S., and he owns translations of American writers to "prove" the theory. Though the literature is careful not to claim that the coming financial Armageddon is being instigated by Jewish financial interests in the U.S., its intent is transparent. Other times the husband argues that the Holocaust is an impossibility. Such a multitude of humans (6 million) could not have been exterminated in so short a time (1938-45).

It wasn't Jews only the Nazis wiped out. Communists, Seventh Day Adventists, homosexuals, people with physical or mental disabilities, Sinti and Roma peoples ("Gypsies"), all these were caught and deported to the camps as the Nazis in their war of terror occupied one country after the other, eastern and European.

Last week in Berlin I visited the Holocaust Memorial, dedicated to the European Jews and all the other people who lost their lives in the Nazi nightmare. I also visited the Jewish Museum, completed in 2005. I'll send Elke the literature I collected there, though I doubt she'll glance through it. In recent discussions Elke disclosed how after her parents' deaths she was able to free herself of parental attachments she came to consider unhealthful. Her parents died long, painful deaths that Elke mitigated to the extent possible. It seems to me she was unevenly successful in her efforts to free herself. Making her parents' hateful obsessions her own is like taking on her mother's Alzheimer's or her father's stomach ailments, without will or choice yet with consequences to her health that, were she able to choose, she would readily, speedily cast aside.