

**Casper Star Tribune, June 12, 2016: “Trump phenomenon is frightening”**

I spoke German before I spoke English. Does that make German superior to English? Also I was raised Christian. Does this mean Christianity surpasses Islam or Buddhism? Donald Trump seems to think so.

The love of my early years was a young man whose family, like mine, lived in a settlement of eastern refugees. Downstream of the town Bruchsal, the housing consisted of three streets of duplexes. Half a mile away, our two churches faced each other, the imposing Catholic one where Josef went to mass and its modest Protestant counterpart, which I attended.

Since mass began an hour earlier than the Protestant service, whenever Josef strolled past my house he'd hear me playing my mandolin behind an opened window and billowing lace curtains. He always chose the route past my house to get to church.

Sometimes our settlement elders arranged bus excursions to nearby Heidelberg or, further south, the Black Forest. On these occasions Josef and I exchanged significant glances, sometimes even a few words. One memorable Saturday the settlement held an open-air dance in the woods near our houses. Afterwards, Josef walked me home. We held hands. It was the occasion of our first kiss. Then he spoke the words that have stayed with me to this day: “Daraus wird nichts.” “Nothing will come of it.”

A few years earlier my parents said something similar when they nixed my educational aspirations. At fourteen I left behind my studies at the *Realgymnasium* to look after smallest siblings and serve in our mom-and-pop bakery and grocery store. Mother was ill; she was to die when I was eighteen. Karl, my younger brother, was similarly pressed into servitude.

Josef, too, was beholden to family. His sister took the bus to a factory job while he biked to college.

From the Cheyenne Interfaith Council of Churches I gather that the oppressive religiosity of my youth has given way to a changing theological landscape. Today, it seems, religious divisions are not so much between faiths as they are between the progressive and the reactionary members of various denominations.

Donald Trump, the presumptive Republican presidential nominee, attracts huge audiences. That millions of Americans lap up his rants is a painful reminder of my native country's own ignoble past. How readily the disenfranchised applaud the rhetoric of a tyrant!

“Our Walmart CEO makes \$8,500 an hour. He can pay me \$15 an hour,” a desperate Walmart employee wrote in a last-ditch petition to raise the minimum wage. Walmart is the largest retailer in the world; the Walton heirs are the richest family in America. Back when I immigrated at 22, I never dreamed I'd witness such disparities in wealth—which,

I am certain, are factors in the Trump phenomenon.

It's good to know that the day after Trump called for a ban on Muslims entering the country, the leaders of the Mormon Church rebuked him for it, even though its members are solidly Republican. The leadership of the Union for Reform Judaism and the Central Conference of American Rabbis did likewise. While neither endorses or opposes political leaders, they note that "Jewish history is replete with times when political leaders, both at home and abroad, demonized the Jewish community, much as Mr. Trump now demonizes Muslims, Hispanics, and African Americans. We . . . must speak up against hate speech."

Similarly, the bishops of the Episcopal Church issued this statement: "In a country still living under the shadow of the lynching tree, we are troubled by the violent forces being released by this season's political rhetoric." There is reason to fear popular action subsequent to political hate speech, the bishops add.

The Unitarian Universalist Association notes that Donald Trump refuses to "renounce the endorsement of white nationalists." His call for banning Muslims "legitimizes . . . vicious impulses."

A recent column of mine mentioned "Babi Yar," a documentary composed in the form of a novel. Acquainted with several Ukrainians, I appreciate that, for their parents and grandparents, the worst place in the world to have lived was their home country. These forebears suffered through WWI and II. They experienced the Russian civil war, the Bolshevik persecution of land-owning peasants, the genocidal famine of Stalin's terror.

Then the Wehrmacht invaded, bringing the *Sonderkommando* with its determination to murder the state's entire Jewish population. The Nazi occupation, a tale of killing and suffering on an unbelievable scale, reveals the power of totalitarian ideology: it controls what people may write and thus, what they may think. To my astonishment, while she lived in the U.S., my grad-student Chinese friend treasured an amulet bearing the likeness of Chairman Mao.

Former friends in Germany are Holocaust deniers, even though the events at Dachau and other concentration camps are publicly documented. Babi Yar was witnessed by thousands of Kiev residents.

Who would have thought the seeds to such horrors sprout in today's "Land of the Free."