Germany Close Up

Germany Close Up: American Jews Meet Modern Germany is an independent German youth encounter program, which was established in October 2007. It is administered by the New Synagogue Foundation – Centrum Judaicum, a Berlin based Jewish organization, and was conceptualized by Dr. Dagmar Pruin. Germany Close Up is funded by a grant from the German Government's Transatlantic Program, which draws on funds from the European Recovery Program (ERP) of the German Federal Ministry of Economics and Technology. As such, the program aims to encourage German-Jewish North American dialogue as well as to build bridges to strengthen the involvement of the North American Jewish community in transatlantic relations.

To achieve this aim, Germany Close Up brings groups of young, North American Jews to Germany for short educational trips lasting one to two weeks. These trips aim to provide participants with the opportunity to gain a firsthand experience of modern Germany. Participants are students and young professionals aged between 18 and 35.

Since its establishment, Germany Close Up has brought more than 1200 participants in over 60 groups to Germany. The majority of these groups have been organized together with Jewish partner organizations based in North America and which cover a diverse range of religious and political backgrounds. These organizations have included universities (Hebrew Union College, the Jewish Theological Seminary, the American Jewish University, Yeshiva University, and Brandeis University), the American Jewish Committee, the Anti-Defamation League, Hillel, KIVUNIM, the Council of Jewish Emigre Community Organizations, Camp Ramah, the Rabbinical Assembly, Limmud, the Orthodox Union, Global Round Table, B'nai B'rith NYC, the Jewish Community Centre of Manhattan, the Holocaust Centre of Toronto, Classrooms without Borders, and He'bro. Despite cooperating with these organizations, most of these programs are open for individual application. In addition, Germany Close Up has also run several trips without an affiliated cooperation partner. These measures ensure that Germany Close Up reaches out to both affiliated and unaffiliated Jewish Americans.

During their time on Germany Close Up, participants are exposed to a variety of aspects that make up contemporary Germany. In so doing, both the past and the present are in focus. In focusing on the past, all Germany Close Up programs look at Germany's efforts to deal with the memory of the Holocaust and the Nazi horror up to the present day. In focusing on the present, the programs consider Germany's transformation in the last 60 years into a modern, reunified, and democratic country in the heart of the European Union. In these units, attention is also given to the reemergence of Jewish life in Germany and the current growth of the Jewish community.

During the program, participants are confronted with various questions relevant to understanding modern German society. These questions are provoked both through meetings and discussions, as well as excursions and other activities. All groups meet with a representative of the German Federal Foreign Office and a member of the German Federal Parliament. They also have meetings with representatives of grass roots movements and Jewish organizations, academics and journalists, members of the Jewish community, and young Germans of their own age, both Jewish and non-Jewish. Germany Close Up students groups, often participate in study days or sessions together with German students to discuss their different perspectives on the same topic. The Germany Close Up experience is rounded out by visits to museums and memorials, and to towns and cities outside Berlin. Early on in each trip, participants are taken on a walking tour of Berlin's former Jewish neighborhood, on which they often encounter Stolpersteine for the first time. All trips include a visit to the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe in Berlin and to the Jewish Museum in Berlin. In addition, all groups also visit to a former concentration camp, such as Sachsenhausen or Buchenwald.

Beyond these common units, each Germany Close Up trip also has its own special focus. This special focus is often aligned with the goals and priorities of the affiliation partner organization. Each year, Germany Close Up runs a program with a focus on interreligious dialogue together with the American Jewish Committee. Trips with a focus on Jewish history and the roots of the Ashkenazic community in Germany are also run regularly for rabbinical and cantorial students. Individual programs have also been run focusing on green energy and LGBT issues. Several trips have also been scheduled to allow participants to simultaneously take part in larger events concurrently taking place in Germany. Trips have been run that included participation in a Limmud conference, attendance at the *Berlinale*, Berlin's international film festival, and attendance at the decennial passion play in Oberammergau.

Based on the input gained during their Germany Close Up trip, it is hoped that participants begin to ask their own questions about how they can use this knowledge to shape the future and that it encourages them to participate in construcutive dialogue.

Remembering the past – Shaping the future

Germany Close Up Essays Contests

In 2009, and again in 2011, two essay competitions were conducted for the alumni of Germany Close Up. The award winning authors from both years represent this wide range: a lawyer from Israel who is now a PhD student in political science in New York (Hadas Cohen, 2009) and a PhD student in Statistics from Atlanta (Louis Mittel, 2011); two assistant Professors, who once studied together at the University of South Florida (Mary Rachel Gould and Rachel E. Silverman, 2009) and a conservative rabbinical student from the American Jewish University in Los Angeles (Kerry Chaplin, 2011); an Assistant Regional Director of the Anti-Defamation League (Liz Foreman, 2009) and a Rabbi from St. Louis, who studied at Hebrew Union College (Daniel Bogard, 2011).

The starting point for many of these essays is the Holocaust. Indeed, the shadow of the Holocaust is something before which all of our programs must answer. In taking the Holocaust as their starting point, the following essays outline the various attempts made by participants to come to terms with and express the often conflicting feelings it arouses. Although each participant has their own way of expressing this, two main lines of expression are evident in these essays. Many of the authors trace continuity from the past to the present. From time to time, however, there is a palpable break, symbolic of the break that the extermination of the Jews of Europe still presents for our participants today.

Winner Essays 2011

Crossing Friedrichstrasse
By Louis Mittel
1st prize

As I stir the milk and honey around in my cup, I wonder if I may be reading into all of this too much – most cafés serve milk and honey, not just Israeli ones. Still, I feel there is something special about Aroma cafe. There is something that makes it more than just another cool place to grab a coffee in Berlin. As I struggle to put my finger on it, I reexamine the last few hours.

The skies are as grey as the smooth slab bench we sit on in the courtyard. Berlin's latest Holocaust museum, The Topography of Terror, has a modern façade, also grey. By this point in the trip, the pattern has become predictable: grey is the official color of Holocaust museums. But among the grey museums visited so far, this one stands out the most. The museum's portrayal of the terror of the SS and Gestapo**,** almost exclusively through photographs**,** is powerful. The photo collection extends way beyond the famous ones that have become emblematic of the Holocaust (like the one of the young Jewish boy with the star on his jacket holding up his hands). Many images are new to me. One of SS officers cruelly taunting and assaulting Orthodox Jews in the streets haunts me.

By now the three of us have developed a post-museum routine. Mathan, Mardy, and I had been exploring Berlin for the past 6 days, and perhaps because of the nature of the trip, we have developed a comfort in our friendship unusual for people that didn't know each just a week before. We meet outside and exchange our immediate reactions. At times our conversation is lighthearted and we crack jokes; other times it springboards into debates about history or philosophy.

But at today's gathering, there is unanimous agreement that the museum was very moving and educational. Following a week of being inundated with a full schedule of Holocaust related content, none of us expected the museum to have such a significant impact on us. We talk a bit more, but we are all mentally drained. It's our second museum of the day and our minds are saturated from staring at hundreds of attention-grabbing pictures in the span of an hour. We also realize we are hungry. We decide to go to get something to eat.

As we leave the courtyard, we walk beside what looks like an archeological dig. A plaque explains that it is the partial excavation of underground SS offices. The museum is located at the site of the former SS headquarters, a building that was bombed and destroyed during WWII. Looking at these underground ruins, one is drawn into a false sense that they represent history from an ancient time. They remind me of excavations I'd seen in the Old City of Jerusalem on the way to the Western wall from the Zion gate.

We cross a busy street and look out for an attractive restaurant. Beckoning to us is a place called Aroma Espresso Bar, sitting brightly on the adjacent corner. From a distance we could see that it was crowded (a good sign for foreigners deciding on a place to eat). I've heard positive reviews of Aroma from friends who have lived in Israel, I tell the group. Aroma is like the Israeli version of Starbucks, but better, and with more food offerings. It's a ubiquitous part of Israeli café culture. I didn't expect to come across it in Berlin, but I knew they had opened a branch in NYC, and Berlin's supposed to be the NYC of Europe. In we go.

Through the glass doors we are met with a sleek and hip décor – flat screen TVs above the register illuminate the menu – and the pulsating rhythm of busy cappuccino machine steamers. The noise of a bustling café during lunch hour is refreshing after the somber but eerie quiet of the museum's visitors, all wandering the open hall in silence. How the day's sights and sounds can change so fast!

Aroma Espresso Bar has a comprehensive coffee beverage menu, of course. It also serves fresh eclectic sandwiches and large bowls of vibrant salads with an Israeli flair. They have combo deals that give you a drink and a little taste of everything, served on a tray that looks like it could be from the McDonald's of the future. As a signature Aroma touch, each tray comes with one or two delicious Israeli milk chocolates.

We choose our meals, get our trays, and sit outside facing the museum at the SS site down the street. We dig into our sandwiches, sip our warm beverages, and continue our discussion. Mardy tells us about his grandfather from Poland who survived Auschwitz.

At some point I become acutely aware of the juxtaposition of the modern Israeli Aroma Espresso bar, an expanding multinational restaurant chain, and the decaying SS Headquarters, a relic of German anti-Semitism, oppression, and crimes against humanity. It is a contrast that has stuck with me ever since.

Many people discuss the irony of German Jews buying a Mercedes-Benz. What about the irony of three American Jews, all grandsons of Holocaust survivors sipping cappuccino at an Israeli coffeeshop across the street from the SS and Gestapo headquarters? The irony here is buried under the surface – quite literally in the case of the underground SS ruins.

To the Berliners that fill every seat and stool around me, Aroma is just an innocuously cool café (which it is), one of many others in any metropolis vying for the attention of the afternoon coffee drinker. Its Israeli identity is anonymous. Like the Jewish identities of the three of us; like my German last name – Mittel – and my corresponding German ancestry, unknown to the crowd of strangers. (Our American tourist identity, however, isn't anonymous; anyone could gather that by sizing us up for a few seconds.)

For me, however, these identities are buzzing, unwilling to be ignored. I am a Jew at an Israeli café in Germany.

How the trajectory of history can change so fast. The Nazi plan, once seemed *fait accompli*, yet absolutely backfired. Not only did Nazi Germany collapse, the site of the headquarters of the SS and Gestapo, the core of Nazism and German ultra-nationalism, has been flipped *by Germany* into a permanent display of their incomprehensible terror. From Nazi pride to German shock and shame. Add to this, three Jewish young adults, children of German Jews, back in Germany at the museum. And our trip paid for by Germany no less, with the intent of visiting places like the location of the old Nazi SS headquarters to appreciate their demise and see what achievements Germany has made since. Could the Nazis have ever possibly envisioned this conclusion to their dark experiment?

Perhaps some imaginative Nazi officer who had a suspicion that Hitler's egomaniacal dream would drive Germany off a cliff could have almost imagined it. But Aroma café, no way!

The Aroma café is not just the Aroma café: It represents a vibrant, happening, independent Jewish state the Nazis never could have imagined. To top it off, Hitler and the Nazis were, ironically, in some ways responsible for the metamorphosis of European Jewry into Israel. While Zionism as an idea and a fringe movement existed before Nazism, it was the Holocaust that provided the impetus for the creation of the Jewish state. This state goes on to flourish into the 21st century (with over 120 Aroma cafés in Israel, locations in 7 other countries, and counting) and decides to drop one**,** as if in symbolic gesture as tribute to its roots**,** right next to the heart of the institution – and in the very heart of the country – that tried to annihilate its people.

Aroma also embodies a wider phenomenon that is the popularity of Germany – Berlin especially – for Israelis, a trend which is both understandable and bizarre. This was evident on our trip, as we encountered Israelis multiple times. We heard Hebrew spoken on the streets of Kreuzberg. One of our German tour guides was dating an Israeli. Also as part of the trip, we visited Kol Berlin, a startup Israeli radio station in Berlin. The head of the station explained briefly why there are so many Israelis in Berlin: Israel is a short plane ride away. Israel is a tiny country – its people feel a need to get out. Tel Aviv and Berlin share a similar liberalism and vivacity. Many Israelis have grandparents that came from Germany and therefore they have a natural curiosity about their past. Presented this way, Berlin is simply an attractive choice.

This account, however, glosses over some details. It's not just that many Israelis have grandparents that came from Germany -- many have grandparents that came from Auschwitz. The attitude of Israelis flocking to Berlin, while reasonable, is a complex dynamic that can at times seem cavalier. They claim to be conscious of how they relate to where they reside and that they have just developed ways to cope

with the inherent strangeness. One method in particular (that my friends on the trip and I occasionally use as well) – a timeless but provocative classic – is through joke. We learn at Kol Berlin that the DJ incorporates Holocaust humor (in both Hebrew and German) throughout his program. These same airwaves in Berlin carried Hitler's tyrannical rants just over half a century ago. How could it get more ironic?

I can't help but connect this to something we were told by a speaker one day at the beginning of our trip. We all know that the slogan of Holocaust remembrance is "Never Again". But for the two parties, Germans and Jews, there are two sides to this proverbial proverb**:** Never Again Be Victims and Never Again Be Perpetrators. Back at Aroma, in front of me at our table, on opposite sides of Friedrichstrasse we see manifestations of these Never Again components. We have**,** on one side**,** a museum devoted to locking the perpetration in collective memory. On the other side, an entrepreneurial outpost represents a sample of the culture of a country which was founded in part on the basis of the "Never Again Be Victims" principle.

The existence of an Israeli restaurant chain in Berlin across the street from the old offices of the SS is a testament to the revolution that both the Jewish people and the German people have undergone since the time the SS building was standing and in full force. Both people have rebounded, rebuilt and reconfigured. The sides of the street have evolved. Where once stood the SS center and perhaps a Jewish bakery, now firmly resides the Topography of Terror Museum and Aroma Espresso Bar. I wonder if we appreciate on both sides the degree of overhaul that the two replacements epitomize. In fact, it's the Topography of Terror exhibit that's loud; the Aroma Espresso Bar is silent.

Knowing Olli
By Kerry Chaplin
2nd Prize

Oliver – I later learned to call him Olli – is physically imposing, tall and wide, with a shaved head, which made him immune to the effects of walking in the rain without an umbrella. No hair to mess up, he said. He is studying to be a teacher, taking courses in history and theology, lives well outside Berlin itself, and shuttles to the city for classes and work. His formidable appearance uniquely qualifies him to be a bouncer. On the morning we met for coffee, he had slept only two hours, since he had finished work at 5am and returned both home and back to the city by train before meeting at 10am. Our conversation, the one we were about to have, was very important to him.

The first time we met, he and I and thirty other students, both Americans participating in Germany Close Up and Germans studying at Humboldt University, ate dinner together. Our table of six talked about Martin Buber, whose Prophetic Faith we had studied together during a Humboldt University course earlier in the evening – what does it mean, after all, that the Messiah should be godlike, but manlike? – and the differences and similarities between and within Protestant and Jewish theologies.

With one man, who lacked in general a sense of tact, I talked about the Shoah, which he seemed to write off as an unfortunate event in a series of unfortunate events enacted against the Jews. “There were, of course, many shoahs before it.” In order to respond as consciously as possible, I intellectualized the discussion, pointing out that those were tragedies yes, but the Shoah for its industrialization of mass murder was, in fact, different, and only it is the Shoah. He continued to press my point, but eventually had to eat his soup. Where is the line between simple ignorance and anti-semitism?

Throughout the discussions at our table, Oliver was quiet. He listened, interjecting a few times to say only that his English was poor. Not until the Jewish students were saying the prayer after a meal and I was showing the Hebrew text to the Humboldt students did he speak more than a few words. He translated the Hebrew to German for his classmates. And he asked me about the ritual itself – how often we say these prayers and why certain parts are said out loud and others are said quietly.

As we left the dinner, I encouraged him, “Your English is really very good. I wouldn’t say so if it weren’t true.” He was embarrassed and self-denigrating, and I asked him for his contact information so that we could stay in touch. He paid his bar tab, and shared what he had likely hoped, but feared to share all evening: he had never before met Jews.

“What did you think?” I asked him with a smile.

He said, “Well, it’s strange.” He paused. “My grandfather was S.S. He worked in the death camps.”

I suppose I should have been more stunned, shocked, speechless, uncomfortable, but I was instead curious. “Did your grandfather tell you that?”

“No.”

“Did your parents tell you?”

“No.”

“How did you find out?”

“I opened a drawer and there was a picture of my grandfather – in uniform.”

“How did you feel?”

“I was shocked.”

We reached the last shared street corner on our walk out of the restaurant, and we stopped. Clearly, we needed more conversation, each of us from the other, if only to know what it was that we sought from one another. I suggested we get coffee later in the week. He must have liked the idea because before I could email him to set up a meeting, he emailed me.

And so Friday morning, Olli and I met at a train station and walked to a nearby café, which though he didn’t live in the area, he remembered from another student gathering. It was a different café than he had remembered. “Things in Berlin change so fast,” he said.

Neither of us had intended to talk for more than an hour and a half at most, so when he checked his watch four hours later, each of us was surprised. No wonder I was so hungry!

We talked about American politics, German politics, and finally about his family. “Do you think,” he asked, “that we are responsible for the actions of our ancestors?” He looked at his third coffee as he asked.

The responsibility of both asking and answering the question was palpable. Was I, a Jew with no known familial ties to the Holocaust, to speak for all Jews? Was I being asked for absolution? For a reprieve from the certain weight of his uniformed grandfather sitting on his shoulders? I answered more quickly than I expected: “No, I don’t think so. But it does make us responsible for the memory of their actions.”

I am still concerned that this answer is somehow illegitimate for its singular reliance on memory. Both during our organized Germany Close Up tours and during my own exploration, memorials spotted Berlin’s city life. Whether a rarely recognized memorial turned park, an often visited garden of stone blocks, or sidewalk stones with the names of those murdered, memory of past actions, of the painful

pieces of the German narrative, weigh down the collective psychological state of Germans. As a result, some Germans embrace a guilt that promulgates philo-semitism, others ignore what would otherwise be an overwhelming pain, and the rest fall somewhere in between, uncertain of the appropriate emotional reaction.

While Germans build external memorials, Jews build internal ones, clinging to the Shoah as the defining source of modern Jewish identity. The fear of erasure promotes a selective memory, highlighting a narrative of victimhood, rather than one of strength. Jewish Shoah education demands we remember the number 6,000,000, but rarely discusses freedom fighters, or tells the story of Berlin women who successfully protested the expulsion and murder of their husbands, saving their lives. In both narratives, German and Jewish, the weight of memorials affects our abilities to move forward. We become stagnant, so consumed with our own pasts that even in the present, we lose sight of the future in order to re-envision bigger and better memorials, like that at Sachsenhausen or the recently reinvented Yad Vashem. Simultaneously, we look for ways to leave the cycle: “Do you think we are responsible for the actions of our ancestors?” Olli asked.

Though I expected Olli’s question from at least one of the Germans we would meet, and I expected to offer the answer I gave, I had hoped my experience during Germany Close Up would change my pre-formulated answer to address the emotional depth of the question beyond memory. Certainly, memory is important. But after the Germany Close Up experience, I am certain that memory alone is just as detrimental as it is necessary. In the future, I hope to understand how to communicate responsibility beyond memory - beyond victimhood, beyond sterile history books, and in spite of family silences.

Maybe Olli can help.

Daniel Bogard
3rd Prize

I'd been in Germany almost two weeks by the time I found myself shivering and wet, standing next to the thousand year old mikveh (Jewish ritual bath) in the city of Speyer. I had arrived in Germany a few days early to visit an old college friend, Michael, and then for the last week it had been the program. The program was made up of 15 of so mostly rabbinical students from Hebrew Union College, the only seminary for the Reform movement in America--a movement that began 150 years ago in Germany. We started the program with a week in Berlin, touring the sites with a strong emphasis on the Shoah and memorials to it. Most of these memorials I had seen five years before, when I had spent a few weeks on my friend Michael's couch, falling in love with Berlin.

I didn't want to love Berlin, of course. I didn't even want to like Michael when he ended up two doors down from me in our dorm at Macalester College. But almost because of it--because he was German and I was a Jew--we came together. He became one of my dearest friends, and we learned to embrace the discomfort of the Shoah. "Daniel," he told me one night, after a long conversation and perhaps a few beers, "I want to show you the camps." And so it was that 4 years later, I emailed him about a layover in Berlin on a flight to Israel. "Instead of meeting for a few hours," Michael said when I called to ask him, "why don't you stay for a few weeks?"

I loved Berlin, almost from the moment I landed. Busy, bustling, and warm; three things that don't normally go together in a city. Michael loves his country, but particularly loves Berlin, and he took my on a whirlwind tour of underground bars, outdoor music, and fantastic food. While he was at work, I would spend my days at the Jewish sites throughout the city. I found myself surprisingly moved by the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe, and astonished by the architecture of the Jewish Museum. But what I most stuck with me were the Stolperstein. Stolperstein--literally 'stumbling blocks' in German--are small, golden cobblestones that have been placed throughout Germany outside of the homes where Jews once lived. On them are engraved the names of those who were taken away or murdered over the course of the Shoah. They are called stumbling-stones because you are forced to encounter them, forced to stumble over them wherever you go in the country. I was amazed at a society that two generations removed continues to build memorials to their greatest shame, and moved at the willingness of the grandchildren of the Nazis to engage the sins of their forefathers.

It was at the end of that first trip trip when I finally decided to visit Buchenwald. I had been putting off going to the camp, but finally went to the station, bought my ticket, and was on an afternoon train to Wiemar. I made it to Buchenwald too late, just as the site was closing down. I walked amongst the empty buildings, and tried to feel the ghosts in the walls, but soon I was ushered out. With no taxis outside, I ended up walking most of the way back to

town until a man picked me up and drove me the rest of the way. I arrived in Wiemar cold, dispirited, and a little anxious: this was the same walk that my ancestors had been forced to do when they too had arrived by train, and somehow when I came back, I expected to find the Weimar of 60 years prior. Instead, I stumbled into the central square to a scene straight out of a movie: the Christmas market was up, and the cinnamon smell of the hot, spiced Gluehwein was everywhere. The man who had given me a ride (and heard my sob story) insisted that he had to buy me my first few mugs of it--a dept that he happily allowed me to repay with the last few rounds later in the night.

I did end up making it to Buchenwald the next day, and I said my prayers, and a day later than I had planned, got on the train back to Berlin. I spent the ride trying to reconcile the two images: the unspeakable horrors of Buchenwald, and the welcoming, joyful Germany that I encountered in the Christmas Market. I had come to Germany wanting to hate it, and instead found myself missing the sights, the smells, and the people. Which is why when five years later the opportunity arose to go on a Germany Close Up trip, I jumped at the chance.

I had seen most of the memorials we were brought to in Berlin, but in my first trip, I hadn't seen the vibrant Jewish life that has sprung up in the city. With over a hundred thousand Jews in Germany today, it has the seventh most Jews of any nation on earth. Made up primarily of immigrants from the former Soviet Union, German Jewish life today is as varied as anywhere in the world. We spent Erev Shabbat (Friday Night) at a synagogue led by a German woman who had converted to Judaism and become a rabbi in Israel. Then, the next morning a few friends and myself walked to another shul in Berlin, arriving just in time for the end of services. But the community was excited to have visitors, and we were invited to join the communal meal afterward, where much singing was done, and much vodka was drunk (these are Russian immigrants, after all...).

It was such a different experience, to see Jewish Germany not as a relic of the past, not as a thing to be memorialized and taught in history class, but instead as a living, breathing community. It was this that that I took with me as our Germany Close Up trip began to explore the country outside of Berlin. We spent a day in Worms and Speyer, two of the three great cities (Mainz being the third) of Jewish learning in the Middle Ages. We saw the ancient graves of the great rabbis in Worms, and then finally made our way to the thousand year old mikveh at Speyer. Which is how I found myself, cold, shivering and soaking wet.

The woman who showed us the grounds of the mikveh had been leading tours there for as long as many of had been alive, but was clearly very excited to have a group of rabbinical students. We prayed the mincha service (afternoon prayers) standing on the grounds where most of the last millennium, the community shul had stood. She then took us to the mikveh, built underground so that it drew its water from ground-water, rather than being dependent on rain water. This is what had saved it when the Nazis came to power: it had been boarded up, and used as storage. And so there it was, still a kosher mikveh, built by my ancestors a

thousand years before, and it felt like it was calling out to me. Which is when I turned to Jack--a friend and fellow trip member--and together we asked if we could get in--if we could immerse ourselves in the waters.

The tour guide was so excited at the idea that this sweet, elderly woman literally ran back to the main office to ask permission. She came back smiling ear-to-ear, and clutching a towel that she had found for us, apologizing that she only had one for us to share. So Jack and I went in, we undressed, and then one at a time, we immersed. The water was freezing, the kind of cold that makes your teeth rattle and your lungs feel like you can't catch a breath. But it was amazing. In immersing, we became a part of our own history, and in doing so claimed a part of living Germany as our own. Above ground, we focused on the torn down remains of a thousand-year-old Jewish civilization that had been utterly massacred by the Nazis. But underground, coming out of the mikveh, we felt very much a part of the Jewish Germany that was very much alive.

The Shoah may have dealt an unrepairable blow to the chain of Jewish history in Germany, but there are those working everyday to add the next link: the non-Jewish tour guides we had at the memorials, who work to ensure that every German is aware of his or her history; the Russian immigrants who we spent Shabbat with, who are focused on creating a contemporary, vibrant Judaism for their children in Germany; and the Germany Close Up staffers, whose hard work and remarkable dedication allowed a group of American rabbinical student to come and bear witness to the remarkable Jewish community that is taking root once again in this land.

Daniel Bogard is in his final year of rabbinical school in Cincinnati, OH at Hebrew Union College. Along with his fellow rabbinical student wife, Karen, he will be moving to Peoria, IL to take up a post as the community rabbi there. Karen and Daniel are expecting their first child in June.

Winner Essays 2009

Hadas Cohen

The Impossibilities of Transcendence – Or Why I Felt Bad Because My Grandparents Did Not Have to Survive Auschwitz
1st Prize

To articulate my impressions of Germany, I need to start from the beginning, and the beginning is in Israel, where I was born.

Growing up there, I always felt somehow inadequate in comparison to my friends. True, half of my family on my mother's side was killed during the Second World War. Yet, no one survived Auschwitz or any other famous extermination camp for that matter, and neither of my grandparents had numbers tattooed on their forearms. In fact, whenever us kids in the family asked questions about the past, awkward silences came up, so at some point we stopped asking.

In my mother's family no one ever really talked about these things. What I do remember is a vague story about my grandfather's nine out of thirteen siblings disappearing and their fate unknown, or the murder of my grandmother's youngest sister. These stories, which I heard from my mother, and even she was not exactly sure of the details, seemed like semi-vivid dreams one can hardly remember when waking up. Looking back, I am astounded by how little I understood of the meaning of these silences back then.

In Israel, every April we commemorate the Holocaust on a special day to remind us of what happened and to ensure that we will never forget. As a child I remember that on that day I was glued to the TV, both attracted and appalled as I watched the black and white documentaries about the camps. I remember pictures of bodies piled up, and stacks of human hair and shoes taken from the victims before they were sent to the gas chambers. Film footage showing lines of sickly thin naked people waiting to be killed was mixed with heartbreaking testimonies of survivors, along with stories about medical experiments conducted by Dr. Mengele. The absence of history within my own family was compensated by the national one I saw on television. These documentaries filled in the gaps created by my grandparents' silences, for whom, I now realize, no words could articulate what had happened "there."

At the same time, as if in a parallel universe that had nothing to do neither with the national commemoration of the Holocaust nor with my family's silences, my parents took me and my sister to a trip to Germany during the summer between fourth and fifth grade. I remember my sister and I fighting endlessly in the back of a rented car as we traveled from France to Belgium, and then finally to Germany. The trip was fun, and the Germans we met had nothing to do with the S.S. soldiers I saw on

T.V. on Holocaust day. Back then I was completely unaware that on our road-trip in 1982, we most likely did come across one or two German perpetrators who managed to evade judgment, and were reabsorbed into German society without having paid for what they have done.

Fast-forwarding a few decades, I am now back in Germany again, yet this time with the Germany Close Up group on a trip I was hesitant to take. Since my Israeli childhood, I have moved to New York City, where I am now pursuing a Ph.D. in political science. I am writing my dissertation about the Israeli Palestinian conflict, and about how the memory of the Holocaust is related to the occupation of the Palestine people. In New York, I have very good German friends, and I have even been to Berlin once before for a friend's wedding.

I am hesitant to go on this trip because I am aware of the "Holocaust industry," and I do not want to participate in what I believe to be the confiscation of memory by an agenda that aims at making political gains. At the same time, I know that Berlin is amazing, and Germany, I remember from my previous trips, is much more than just the Holocaust. And besides, I am beyond all of that. So when the opportunity presents itself, I decide to go.

Berlin

The trip started in high spirits. Berlin, one of the most important art capitals of the world, teased us seductively on the first night of our arrival. When aimlessly walking through the city with two other group members, we come across a gallery opening in Hackesche Höfe. The theme of the show, affordable art, is unfathomable in my New York mindset. Affordable what? 200 Euros for a beautiful black and white photograph I can see perfectly placed above my desk? I like this city, I think, and I have to restrain myself from buying the picture. From the gallery opening we continue to a trendy Vietnamese restaurant, where we are surrounded by beautiful people. The city feels like a stylish, more sophisticated, and definitely more socialist New York.

But Berlin is also one big memorial site, and with the group I am taken to see the Jewish Synagogue that was destroyed during the Reichskristallnacht, which comes to life in front of my eyes as if right out of a history book. The cemetery-like memorial monument at the city center is impressive and chilling at the same time. Later, the Jewish Museum with its dark tower evokes in me a suffocating anxiety when the heavy doors of the towers close behind us, and we are locked inside for a long minute.

In hindsight, the grander the Holocaust memorials, the quicker and more efficiently my emotional defenses spring up to shield me from that horrific past. What was astounding, however, was the way the small things, the ones which surprise you and which you cannot anticipate, manage to penetrate and leave their mark. Those things were not the way Germany dealt with its Nazi past as a nation, but rather

the everyday practices adopted and enacted by “regular” Germans. I find out, for example, that certain German words are no longer used because they are considered to be Nazi terminology. I see small golden memory stones implanted in Berlin's sidewalks with names of dead Nazi victims, outside the buildings from which they were taken to their death. Germans who live in these buildings today, I am told, are the ones who initiated and paid for the construction of these stones. No government sponsored this project, nor has it been imposed from above with someone else deciding what to remember and how to feel. No, this is coming from the ‘bottom up,’ and it is one of the ways Germans today choose to make sense of their past.

We are taken to see the Parliament and we meet Member of Parliament Klose, who tells us how much Germans love Obama. We listen to classical music, and one night I go out with local friends to a “silent” concert, where the audiences are given headphones for a simultaneous individual and group experience. Every night we go out to different cozy restaurants, followed by drinks at candle-lit bars. We dance at a club inside an old factory building, with cathedral-like high ceilings, and old paintings on the walls. In New York, I hardly ever go out to clubs, but here I dance the night away. I cannot get enough of the city, and on the third day of the trip I decide that when I come back to New York I will look for fellowships and move to Kreuzberg! There, in that quaint ethnic neighborhood that young hipsters share with Turkish immigrants, I will write my dissertation.

Yet Berlin, this hip artistic city, is a city that similarly to Germany as a whole, exists under the daunting shadow of a complicated past. On one of our daily group tours we walk along the remains of the Wall, with a former East Berliner guide telling us the history of the division of the country after the Second World War. She shows us a subway map they had back then, on which the graphics are drawn only up to the borders of the former GDR, which ended at the Wall separating East from West Berlin. Beyond that border, as if in a nightmarish distorted reality, the map is white. I can only try to imagine what it must have been like to live under such a regime, which does not allow the existence, even as a mere possibility, of what it cannot tolerate.

The Camp

And then, on the next day, my own private demons are unleashed. That dreary morning we are taken to Sachsenhausen, a former concentration camp next to the city of Oranienburg, located an hour away from Berlin. I see that some of the houses at the edge of the town face the walls surrounding the camp. From their windows, I think, one had to see what was going on inside. I realize that even those who live within the town itself, away from the camp, must have seen the shackled prisoners running through the city every day on their way to the slave labor sites. At this point of the tour I am still emotionally intact and removed. “This did not happen to me,” I keep on telling myself, and this is not happening now. We continue with our tour into the campground itself. I am physically cold, and the umbrella cannot shield me from the heavy rain. All I want is to be warm and to go back, yet our guide takes us deeper and

deeper into the campground, away from the comfort of the visiting center. I start to think about the twenty-four hour roll calls those brought here had to endure during rain shine or snow, and I see the machine guns poised on top of the watch towers pointed at the prisoners to ensure their obedience.

I am haunted by how it must have felt like to be brought here, to a lawless land where the opposite of what we perceive to be humanity set the norm. Where inmates were yelled at instructions in a language they could not understand, instructions whose defiance would result in being shot to death. Similarly to my experience when I first watched Leni Riefenstahl's "Triumph of the Will," I feel as though all of this is directed at me. That if I had been there, I would have been the one dragged away and... And I stop, it is simply too much, I cannot be here anymore, I need to get out. My academic "protective shield" is gone, and the distance between being here now and being here back then melts away. In my mind, the barrier between nightmares and reality no longer exists.

We finally return to the warm bus, which takes us back to Berlin. The trip continues, but I am changed. It is a process I am still undergoing, and which I still try to make sense of. But what I do know is that I saw something there, a chilling side of human nature I know we all possess, a side that is very rarely unleashed. And the most horrific of all, I realize, is that all my degrees and all my education would have meant nothing in there. Now I understand why I did not want to go on this trip, why despite my extensive travels all over the world, I never went to Eastern Europe, the land of the camps. The inescapable reality is this - I am Jewish, and if I had been there back then walking on the very ground I am now walking as a free women, it would have been me in the nightmarish documentaries I saw as a child on Holocaust day.

Facing the Demons and Still No Answers

When I came back from the trip I asked my family about our past, doing that for the first time with the intention of actually hearing the answers. What happened to my grandfather's siblings and parents who disappeared, and why it is that my grandmother said that she no longer believes in God after the War. But my mother does not know, or does not want to talk about the details, and both of my grandparents have passed away.

There are no answers, and in a way, knowing the details does not matter anymore. I realize that my whole life I have strived to escape the limits of my nation's history, to transcend and define myself outside my Jewish identity. But here, in the camp, this attempt reached its end. A part of me, I have come to understand, will always possess an inherent fear that it could have been me standing at the fatal end of a machine gun, and I could have been one of the relatives who disappeared into oblivion and whose fate no one knows. As much as I have come to terms with my nation's past, it is a nation of Holocaust survivors, with its own inescapable heritage. And on this trip to Germany I have taken the first steps to begin and make peace with this legacy, which I now realize is a part of who I am.

This essay was written following my trip to Germany with a Germany Close-Up group in October, 2008. My reflections were inspired by the works of Jean Amery, Hanna Arendt and Giorgio Agamben.

I would like to thank Dagmar Pruin, the head of Germany Close-Up, and to the group's guides: Anna Held, Lisa Stengel and Tobias Weber, who all made the trip such a memorable experience.

Making History Public: Germany's Efforts to Remember its Past

Mary Gould and Rachel Silverman

2nd Prize

Cities around the world continuously engage in acts of public notification about their pasts. City planners and government officials make decisions about who and what to commemorate, and in what manner this commemoration should take place. French Anthropologist Marc Augé suggests that it is in public spaces, specifically the urban city, where the story of a place is narrated for tourists and locals. Augé contends, "Every town or village not of recent origin lays public claims to its history, displaying it to the passing motorist on a series of signboards, which add up to a sort of 'business card.'"[1] Every city and state has events, people, and places they are proud of and want to display. Statues, monuments, and plaques adorn streets, parks, and town centers paying homage to the past. As a traveler, these sites become "must see" locations. For locals, these structures become defining characteristics of their neighborhoods and cities. Statues, plaques, and monuments become the physical manifestation of a point in time (a person, an action, or an event) that is deemed worthy of remembering. The history of people and place is inscribed on the city streets, where personal and public triumphs and tragedies have occurred.

As Augé notes, history is not hanging on the wall of a gallery, printed on the page of a book, or on display in a museum. History is on the sidewalks, brickwork, green spaces, and buildings that constitute the cities we visit and live within. In a museum, library, classroom, or book the story is protected and monitored by the authors (literal or figurative). In a museum the message is designed and overseen by docents and employees who are educated to help visitors understand the meanings of what they see and hear. On the streets there are no interpreters, no teachers, no "official" translators, there is just the object and the viewer. How does a city tell its history, when the story is often too complex for words? How can city officials ensure that the message of remembrance will be understood? On the street, who will ensure that history is remembered and not ignored or forgotten? The questions we ask here are questions that Germany's citizens, political leaders, and city planners have pondered for decades. How citizens of Germany and the German government have answered these questions is a testament to their efforts to remember their past, and the extent to which they have made an effort to remember was evident to us as we traveled through the capital city of Berlin.

While it is easy to understand how a city or town would want to publicly commemorate a proud past, what about the places with tragic histories? How should traumas be remembered? How does a nation publicly present a past that cannot be glorified? How does a city lay claim to and remember a past that it is not proud of? Does it? Should it? Should an event such as the Holocaust be remembered in a public

[1] Marc Augé, *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity* (London: New Left Books, 1995), 68.

manner? More specifically, and the question that serves as the focus of this essay, we ask: how should Germany publically commemorate the places where genocide began?

Participating in the Germany Close Up program offered us the opportunity to experience for ourselves the efforts of the German government and citizenry to memorialize, and not glorify, the past. Through our own eyes we were able to see the way Germany (and specifically the city of Berlin) publicly remembers its past. Given what we saw during our time in Germany we believe the title of the program (Germany Close Up) is not only fitting and appropriate, but also subtly foreshadowed the experiences we had in Berlin. On each of the nine days of our visit we saw Germany from a unique and "close up" vantage point. We believe that our experience in Berlin was specific to the Germany Close Up program, in that we would not have seen Germany in quite the same way if we had designed this trip ourselves or participated with another group of "cultural tourists." Many of the sites and details that we were shown on our trip could have been easily overlooked or not rendered as meaningful had we not had our guides to bring us close enough to see them. Over the course of our travels we infrequently saw a billboard or mural sized tribute or remembrance to the Holocaust or survivors. More likely, we saw small and relatively unassuming memorials to the past. Many of these memorials and signposts required close attention and observation.

The need to look closely became most evident on one of our first walking tours through Berlin, a walking tour titled "Empty Space? Don't Trust the Green Grass!" As our guide, Dr. Pruin, pointed out a set of what we soon learned were "stumbling stones" many of us realized the significance of looking for and finding the small details that we would "stumble" upon during the course of our trip.

These tile-sized brass plaques, created by German artist Gunter Demnig, on the sidewalks of Berlin, and other cities throughout Europe, stand as markers to the victims of the Nazi terror. The four-by-four inch plaques are found in Austria, Germany, Hungary, and the Netherlands outside the homes and businesses of stolen lives. Since 1997, over twenty thousand blocks have been laid in the ground by Berlin native Gunter Demnig. Demnig receives names and information from individuals and also from a database of victims found at Yad Vashem in Jerusalem. When Demnig acquires a new name, he constructs a four-inch concrete cube, which is then covered in a sheet of brass. The brass cover is engraved with the individual's name, year of birth, and, if known, the dates of deportation and death. Most common on the stones are the words, 'Hier Wohnte' ('Here Lived').

Some say these stones are disrespectful to the dead; that walking on or over a person's name is disrespectful to their memory. Others think that these small and present reminders continually honor those who were lost. These stones encouraged our group to have critical conversations and discuss the act of remembering from both of these perspectives. The stumbling stones were one of the elements of our trip that could have been overlooked had they not been pointed out to us. Once they became present, we began to see them throughout the city. At times it seemed like we were all looking at our

feet, trying to spot the next golden reminder in the sidewalk. At each stone we would stop, read the name(s) of the victim(s), and pause for a moment. Each stumbling stone in the city became a point of reflection for our group. These small markers were meaningful points of remembrance.

In contrast, the New Synagogue in Berlin was a much larger point of remembrance, one that not only provided us with the history of Jews in Berlin but also a present-day way to navigate the city and find our hotel at night. Our hotel was only a short walk from the New Synagogue, in the former East Berlin, and on many occasions we found ourselves navigating our way home by simply looking to the skyline for the architecturally impressive structure. The size and beauty of the building, along with the blue historical markers all over the neighborhood, aided us as visitors exploring a foreign land. As Jewish tourists in Germany, the Synagogue was not only a place to examine Berlin's past but also a point of reference for our present travels. The site fulfilled our need for positional orientation as well as our parallel need for historical and contemporary information. The New Synagogue was also a cultural point of reference for our group. In a rather ironic way, we all knew that once we saw the Synagogue we were headed in the right direction and were close to the hotel (our home away from home).

Only a few blocks from the Synagogue is an art gallery; during our time in Berlin an exhibition on James Brown was showing. Along the same road in the opposite direction is a museum dedicated to The Ramones. The contrast between the history we learned inside the Centrum Judaicum and the choices of music-based art all around us tells a story of Berlin's past as well as its present, and the juxtaposition reflects a city steeped in a dedication to remembering the past, but forging ahead into a globalized future. In a similar way, the armed guards standing at the archway entrance of the Synagogue also tell a familiar story – both of past and present fears and injustice. The closeness of our hotel to the Synagogue was a daily reminder of the modern trajectory of German culture and how contemporary Germany refuses to forget its past. Furthermore, our daily traversing of an area where Jews once lived, one now occupied by less traditional residents and tourists, provided ample time to closely examine how the past exists within the present. Once a Jewish neighborhood, the area surrounding the Synagogue is now a trendy district of bars and shops. The remnants of pre-war, Jewish life in Berlin were at times invisible to us; if it had not been for the help of our guides these small yet important details may have gone unnoticed.

Throughout our trip, it was the micro-details that elicited the most emotional responses. One example we can never forget was during a day-trip to the town of Wittenberg. Visiting the home of Martin Luther was a treat for all of us who had learned the history of his Thesis in our high school history classes. After almost a week of traveling through Berlin it seemed everyone was excited for a chance to visit places not part of Nazi history. The tour of the town took us through the church where Luther's infamous posting occurred; we explored his home and pre-Thesis life. Our walking tour through Wittenberg also took us to a memorial to the Holocaust, another remembrance set in stone and golden in color. This remembrance, a flat brass sculpture embedded in the cobblestones, sat on Jüdenstraße (Jews' Street).

The brass was molded as four panels, appearing to be separated by a golden liquid pushing through its cracks. In a square shape around the brass, was black stone with the words "From the depths, the truth will emerge," inscribed in both Hebrew and German. For quite a while we all stared at the plaque. The way the brass was bubbling through the cracks was striking and powerful. Our attention was diverted as we were directed to "look up." It was in this moment that we were brought face-to-face with the tension of remembrance. Above the memorial on the street, on the highest corner of the adjacent building, sat an antisemitic stone carving. The image was of a Rabbi sucking the teat of a pig. The image immediately changed the tone of this experience. Our group was silent and it was apparent that there was a collective feeling of hurt and anger amongst our friends. The position of the somber memorial under the offensive stone carving created the space in which we stood, a space which mixed the past and the present, a space in which we reflected on the history of Jews in Germany and Germany's treatment of Jews. Then, without warning, someone started laughing. Soon, we were all laughing, and what we were laughing at had nothing to do with bubbling brass or pigs in stone.

To our left, under a large pine tree was a small brass plate. Engraved on this plate was the word "Sorry." This one little word changed the mood of our group, in this moment and for the remainder of our trip. Not even our tour guide in Wittenberg could tell us about this placard. She admitted to the group that this was the first time she had seen this sign. Although we do not know the designer's intentions upon placing the marker, as a group we almost felt it was placed there for us – or for a group such as ours having a similar unsettling experience. This one small symbol spoke loudly to our group.

Although we found great humor and irony in the sign, we also found it representative of our visit and our experience in Germany. This sign clearly signified the overwhelming sense of what we were experiencing – that the nation desires to publicly recognize and reconcile with its past, but that the public presentation of such efforts is complicated. The sign also allowed us to laugh, something we did a lot of on our trip. Laughter filled our trip. The small "Sorry" plaque gave us a reason to laugh during such a sad and tense moment, and laughter provided reprieve from our feelings of anger, hurt, and confusion. Our trip was laden with feelings of remorse and uncertainty brought on by the sights we were exposed to and the topics we were addressing. At the same time our trip was also filled with joy and laughter and our ability to find humor throughout difficult experiences. Laughing as a group created intimate bonds as we negotiated our proximity to the past. Laughing provided an outlet for our critical examinations. Laughing helped us negotiate the pain of remembering. Laughing was the source of much delight. Laughing not only brought us close to each other but closer to understanding modern Germany.

Throughout the week in Germany we were asked to notice a mix of past and present. The modern and historical sides of the nation allowed each participant to question the place Germany holds in today's world. The bonds built within our small group allowed us to ask each other many difficult questions. Questions such as *why* and *how* come first, then come the more specific, more nuanced ways of thinking. It was during these conversations, which mixed tears with laughter, that we were able to

discuss our personal perspectives on German-Jewish, German-U.S., and German-Israeli relations. It was clear we all had our own opinions and insights to offer each other; the closeness of our group allowed us to express our thoughts as honestly and openly as anyone could hope. What this trip offered us was a space and a time to have these conversations. This trip provided a setting that encouraged us to talk about topics we might not otherwise engage in. With the backdrop of Germany/Berlin in each of our conversations, our point of reference was always the history that surrounded us, and the remembrances that were on every corner of the city. Through discussion and exploration we were brought close to each other and close to modern Germany. Our experience in Germany was about finding the hidden moments that connected us to a traumatic history that will forever be a part of our collective story as American Jews, and at the same time finding the ways in which we can continue to move forward, finding comfort and maybe even a moment of laughter.

Conversations, tragedies, triumphs, and laughter are what define the Jewish experience. What we were offered in Germany was an opportunity to experience each of these in the past, the present, and the future *Close Up*.

"German Impressions"
Liz Foreman
3rd prize

"You're going to Germany?

"I could – I could never go to Germany. I lived through the war and I just could never go there. Why are you going to Germany?"

"Why not?" I casually uttered to my 90-year-old great aunt, Pat.

Even though I shrugged my shoulders, the truth was that I harbored a lot of the same hesitations. I wasn't exactly sure why I was going to Germany. As an American Jew born forty years after World War Two, my Jewish identity was formed on notions of "Never forget the six million" and "Never Again." My main associations with Germany were taught to me in school and in the movies, focusing on Nazi Germany. I knew bits and pieces about today's Berlin, and while with reservations, I was intrigued.

So, I went.

As I walked off the plane from New York into Tegel airport on a drizzly July morning, I felt tightness in my chest. Flight announcements came over the loud speaker through an articulate female German voice. Even though the announcement told travelers of a flight to Copenhagen, I couldn't help but flash back to the main association I had with the German language. Holocaust imagery swam through my mind: a family boarding a train to an unknown destination. As the line of passengers filing out of the gate began to move, I stopped myself. No, no. I was in 2008 Berlin, in line for customs. I made it to passport control to meet a blue-eyed attendant. I wondered, as he flipped through the pages of my passport and saw the Israel stamps, if he would know that I was Jewish and refuse my entry. We exchanged glances, followed by the stamp smothering a nearly full page.

I was in.

I moved along to retrieve my bags. I found my fellow Germany Close Up friend, Sara, and as we waited for our bags to come around the belt, Sara whispered in my ear, "You know I couldn't help but think I was in the middle of a Holocaust deportation announcement when I first heard the voice in German." I could only chuckle, nervously embarrassed, when I told Sara I felt the same exact thing. We both looked around suspiciously to be sure no one heard us. Our bags came and we headed out.

On the first night of the program, I learned the context of Germany Close Up. I had been brought to Germany as a part of the repayment of debt of the Marshall Plan to the United States. I realized the trip was something different than just an exploration of the past. It was Germany taking responsibility for its actions and embracing modern progress. I wondered how I fit into this enormous equation.

My ancestors left various parts of Eastern Europe for the United States – Austria, Lithuania, Poland, Romania and Russia. I know nothing of their reasons for coming to America, beyond the history of the Ashkenazic Jewish community. They likely escaped religious persecution and sought a better economic and social life for their children. Aunt Pat's words stuck with me. While she was born in America, I wondered what her old brother, my grandpa Sam, would think of my travels to Germany. Sam immigrated to America at age six from Poland.

While he died before I was born, I always associated him as my closest link to European Jewish life before the Holocaust. In one of the few existing family photos from Poland, Grandpa Sam is around two years old with shoulder-length blonde hair, standing with his entire family. Religious boys, like my grandfather, did not have their hair cut until the age of three; the rest of the family was dressed in religious garb. Grandpa Sam's father, absent from the picture, was already in America, working as a tinsmith and preparing to bring the entire family to America within a few years. When they eventually came on a boat to Ellis Island in New York, they would assimilate and lose some of their religious practice, taking on a more modern life, but never losing their Jewish identity and culture. I knew the German-Jewish community in those days characterized a more assimilated practice of Judaism, steeped in Western belief and not dissimilar to what Grandpa Sam's family adapted to in America. Embraced by this tremendous piece of history in the name of the Marshall Plan, I suddenly saw my own existence in this piece of history. Now was the time to put myself into the equation.

Once we began to tour Berlin and see the remnants of Communism, the beautiful new modern buildings, the cosmopolitan culture and the unending number of war memorials – a grand mixture of past and present, I became much more comfortable. I stopped feeling the tightness in my chest when I heard German spoken on the street. In fact, I enjoyed pronouncing every word I saw written outside of restaurants, street advertisements and everything else I saw. I was impressed with the art and culture of the city and visited modern art museums throughout the city whenever we had free time. Berlin's warm modernity softened my exterior as I explored pieces of history.

Early in the trip, the group visited the Neue Synagoge, or Oranienburger Straβe Shul as it is also known, and learned of its history. Heavily damaged on Kristallnacht, the synagogue's fate had been done in further by Allied bombing during the war. Years later, restoration took place. We browsed restored artifacts from what remained of the main sanctuary. Left with a shortage of time and a large exhibit to take in, I became overwhelmed by what was lost. It was clear that this was a vibrant Jewish community that prayed in a beautiful sanctuary. Suddenly I thought, "what became of these lives?" And I realized that many of them did not survive. To accept such a concept is not an easy thing to do. All my life I had learned about the lives that were lost during the Holocaust. Now I stood in a place where they gathered as a community and practiced Judaism, just as I do in New York.

Our group next moved on to the basement of the building, where the archives of the community are now kept. The archivist explained to us that pictures, community records and many other items had been gathered from all over the world about the Jewish community that called the Oranienburger Straβe home. I was shocked by the volumes of information. These lives went back for centuries. The archivists are now working diligently to piece together as much information as possible about the community from people around the world. They were trying to piece together the families that once were.

The following morning, we visited the Jewish cemetery at Schönhauser Alle. This was the Jewish community's cemetery starting in the 1600's and became full in the 1880's. The people buried there, families in plots together in many cases, were people who led full-fledged, thriving lives in Germany long before the days of Nazi Germany. This cemetery was quite beautiful. It was full of rows of graves with ivy growing over the grounds. While it was overgrown, this added to its beauty.

I was deeply moved by the Jewish history which rested before me, in such a peaceful setting.

It was at this moment that I realized exactly why I was in Germany. I needed to see more of the Jewish past than just the Holocaust history that I already knew.

The acts of the Nazis are completely unforgiveable. Nothing can ever make up for what was lost and nothing will ever make it right. These are notions that I was taught growing up and notions I still believe today. Aunt Pat's objection to a visit to Germany was rooted in this notion.

Memorializing the Holocaust and the bitterness of Germany's past should not stop us, however, from remembering the beauty of those who came before. It is they, too, whose memories were shattered when their descendant's lives were shattered. The ongoing initiative to build a vast archive of the community is a vital way to honor the memory of Jewish life. They are piecing together what existed as a resource for future generations. I needed to see this history, too, in order to understand a piece of the past.

Grandpa Sam's family's departure from Europe preceded the rise of Nazism only by a few decades. The lifelines of his family and those immortalized in the archives started out similarly. Standing two generations later in Berlin, it became tangible and personal to me.

When the group visited what remained of the Oranienburger Straβe Shul, I wanted to be able to see the sanctuary and to say some prayers there. A shortage of time during our visit did not allow this. I stayed in Berlin an extra day after the trip, and on my final Saturday, I went to Saturday morning services with Eryn, another participant on my trip. I thought, perhaps, I would find an experience of the past and pray in this large sanctuary I had heard about. After going through security, we arrived at what is today's "main sanctuary," a small chapel-like space where the congregation prays together, probably holding a

hundred people, at the most. The service was beautiful, full of a lot of spirit. I was surprised to find that it was a congregation affiliated with the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism, the same movement with which I identify. I later learned that many congregants as well as the rabbi are converts to Judaism. The congregation, both in setting and people, was nothing like I thought it would be. A community grows today, with its own identity.

Eryn and I prepared to leave after the service was over. We both were still curious to see the main sanctuary, which we naively thought was where the service would be held. We spotted a man who also attended the service, and asked him about the main sanctuary. He led us to a door that overlooked a large space, like we were looking down on the main level of seats in a concert hall from the second- or third-level balcony, minus any evidence of current use. He pointed to where the women would have prayed and then to the bottom where the men would have prayed.

He then lamented, “It will never be again.”

That tightness returned to my chest as those words rang through my ears. Speechless, I buried my curiosity; I would only be able to witness what exists today. The community I attempted to find was in the archives of the building. A new Jewish community was growing roots following a devastating history.

The following day, I flew home to New York. A few hours after landing, I went to Aunt Pat’s apartment to visit her and my mom, Grandpa Sam’s daughter, who was also in town.

Aunt Pat asked me several times, pointedly, “What is the sentiment of the people?”

I was not quite sure how to answer the question. I realized she was asking about the people who lived through the war, who perpetrated or stood as bystanders to the atrocities. She wanted to understand what happened. It was then that I realized that throughout my trip I, too, had sought to understand the past.

“It will never be again” resonated in my head.

Sitting in Aunt Pat’s living room, I realized that the purpose of my trip was to join in moving forward. The Germans are taking responsibility for their actions and this was my opening to be a partner.

We must always honor and remember the memory of those who died at the hands of the Nazis. This continues to be illuminated in the community that rests in the Schönhauser Alle cemetery and in the archives of the Neue Synagoge.

The best answer that I could give to Aunt Pat lived in that small sanctuary in today’s Oranienburger Straβe Shul. The current Jewish community in Berlin, while small and markedly different than three

generations ago, is growing. It is establishing a Jewish revival and defining its own identity. And in the rich Jewish tradition dating back thousands of years, new life is the ultimate sanctification of honoring the memory of the past.