Survivors and Their Offspring In Post-War Germany

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After the end of the Second World War, when all the horrifying details about the Holocaust had become known to the world, it seemed unimaginable that Jews would ever again settle in Germany, marry, have children, and re-establish Jewish life and Jewish communities there.

Nevertheless, Jewish life in Germany started again for several reasons. It was rudimentary and precarious at first but became increasingly stable.

There are now Jewish communities in quite a number of German cities, the largest in Berlin (6-7,000), Frankfurt (5-6,000), Hamburg and Munich. There are about 30,000 Jews living permanently in Germany now. Of course, this is a very small number, about 5% of the number of Jews who lived as German citizens in Germany before the Nazis came to power. But even this small number of Jews living in post-war Germany is a remarkable phenomenon.

How is it possible to live, as a Jew, in this country with its horrifying past? What impact did the still-apparent evidence of the Holocaust have on the survivors? What was the effect of its political development, its failure to confront the Nazi past, and the resurgence of Neo-Nazism, on them and on those survivors who stayed there after the war or returned there later? How did the reunification of Germany in 1990 effect them?

In this short paper, I will try to answer some of these questions by setting down impressions I have derived from my work as a non-Jewish German psychoanalyst who has worked with many Jewish survivors, and their offspring, in the past 25 years, and my work also as a psychoanalytic-medical counsellor in a family-counselling unit of a Jewish community.

Who re-established Jewish life in post-war Germany? Not many of those who had been born in Germany before the Nazis decided to return there after the war. They could no longer feel at home there. And most of

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the few thousand who had survived, and had been liberated from the concentration camps in Poland and in Germany, wanted to abandon Germany immediately after their liberation, once and for all. However, it was not so easy to do this. There were many difficulties. Those survivors who had lived in Eastern Europe before the war, mainly in Poland, found it impossible to return there. Yet it was far from easy for them to immigrate to one of the Western countries, and, due to the well-known circumstances of that time, it was almost impossible to go to Palestine.

Consequently, they were obliged to hang on in one of the Displaced Persons Camps set up in different parts of the American and British Zones, and wait for their immigration permits. Immigration permits were easily obtainable for those who had relatives in one of the Western countries, while others, mainly former inhabitants of Eastern Europe, and those who were in poor health, were not so fortunate. This selection procedure exposed many to what they felt was a new and traumatically painful experience of discrimination. As time went on, many of those waiting for permits began to engage in some form of trade in order to earn enough for themselves and their new families. The more successful they were in their occupations, the more they were obliged to stay on in Germany. They intended this just for a while but it eventually turned out, for many, to be for good. So it follows that the new Jewish communities in Germany mostly consisted of Jews of Eastern European origin, and only a few Jews had lived in Germany before the war.

Consequently, to settle in Germany was a matter of chance rather than decision. For most, it “somehow” happened that they “somehow” came to stay. Naturally, this provoked a variety of attitudes and feelings. On the one hand, awareness of living as a Jewish survivor in Germany, of creating a Jewish family life there, establishing a Jewish community, and asserting one’s very existence to the Germans who had finally to acknowledge “that we Jews are still there”, “that the Nazis had lost” — all this gave rise to a feeling of triumph over the persecutors. One survivor spoke to me of the need to ensure that, in spite of all that had happened, “Jewish life should have a firm place in Germany in the next fifty or hundred years”, and that this was one of the main reasons why he stayed on and worked for the Jewish community in this country.

Others stayed on or returned for the sake of again rooting themselves in the life “before” — before persecution began, and in an attempt to reorientate themselves after passing through a shattered world.

On the other hand, to settle in or return to Germany — the country of the murderers of the Jewish people — and to live among them, was bound to lead to tremendous tensions and self-reproach. The Germans were unready after 1945 to confront the horrors of their recent history, and wanted to repress this past threatening their very identity. They tried to expel the past by projecting its unacknowledged evil onto the "bad others", i.e. the communists. This situation caused the survivors to see the impossibility of coming to terms with their lives as Jews in Germany. Recurrent anti-Semitic outbursts in the post-war years, and till now, gave rise to feelings "that the horrifying past was just suppressed and at any time about to start again".

Accordingly, most Jews living in post-war Germany experienced their life there as full of conflict and compromise. They felt it to be for a limited time only, and expected that "some day" they would leave it for good.

The break-up of Europe in the post-war years, and the forming of two political blocs by the Cold War, allowed the German population and its leadership to reduce the conflicts and tensions arising from the threatening destructiveness of the past by mechanisms of projection. This form of projective resolution of conflict by viewing oneself not as a people of perpetrators but as potential victims of the "evil communist east" (or, in East Germany, from the other side of the divided German country, of the "evil imperialist west"), I observed also in some of the survivors, and their offspring. It was a form of conflict resolution in regard to their tensions and conflicts as survivors, or children of survivors, in the country of the persecutors. This could persist, as I will demonstrate in the last part of this paper, even after the reunification of Germany.

At the beginning of the Cold War, East Germany had declared itself anti-Fascist. In its early years, this seemed a truthful declaration as many communist leaders had been victims of Nazi persecution themselves. So quite a number of Jews returning to Germany, especially those with a more leftish political orientation, re-settled in Eastern Germany. They were privileged as former victims of the Nazis. For many of them, West Germany was the heir of the "bad" Nazi-Germany. This led, on the part of some German Jews, to a deep identification with Germany, and with its political aims, which caused them to ignore its totalitarian nature. For some, this identification resulted in their tragic participation in a political system that revealed itself, especially after erection of the Berlin Wall, dictatorial and fascist. Many Jewish intellectuals living in East Germany,

once they had recognised the increasing repressiveness of the regime, resettled themselves in West Germany, that had succeeded, after 1949, in developing a democratic political culture common to most West European states in our time.

Those survivors who had settled in the West, but with the feeling that they had packed their suitcases and were ready to go, eventually gave up the idea of life in another place and settled down. Nevertheless, their emotional conflict as Jewish survivors in post-war Germany for the most part persisted. Many who continued to live in Germany felt that they should have left but hadn't, and that their children would. They burdened their children with the belief that they would some time leave Germany, generally in order to settle in Israel and participate in building the Jewish state.

For many of this second generation of Jewish survivors in Germany, this conflict seemed impossible to resolve. Should they do what their parents' generation expected them to do? Or should they stay in the country where they were born, whose language and culture they had acquired, where their families and friends lived? Many tried to resolve this conflict, in adolescence, by strongly identifying with the Jewish tradition and religion, and/or with the aims of the Zionist movement. They developed as one of my patients put it, a strong "Israel-Glaube", a faith in Israel that led them to visit Israel often, "as often as we can afford it". Yet this feeling of warring allegiances persisted. It led some of my patients to settle in Israel though after a time quite a number sooner or later returned to Germany. Many who could not cope sought professional advice that helped them to make up their minds. Others arrived at a different compromise by leaving Germany, and settling permanently in a European country or in the United States.

One patient I saw felt almost pushed by her father, a survivor, into going to Israel, where he intended her to marry. A traditional match-maker (*shadchan*) in Israel had found a husband for her, an Israeli she had still to meet, and the wedding was about to take place. However, at the last moment the patient refused to accept her father's notions. She had met her future husband, the sight shocked her, and she decided to call everything off and to return to Germany, with the idea in mind of leaving Germany for good, and settling in Western Europe or the United States. Her refusal to do what her father most wanted, after he had survived the Holocaust — this autonomous decision not to accede to his wishes — created an

unbearable situation for her. Intense inner conflicts triggered a serious psychosomatic disorder: On her way back to Germany from the wedding she had called off, the first symptoms occurred of a severe colitis that forced her to abandon her plan of separating herself from her family, and living where she wanted. This was the tragic solution to her unbearable conflicts, the product of unbearable transgenerational burdening.

Many of the second-generation patients I saw came to me because they did not know where to settle and find a center for themselves. Quite a number of these patients did achieve a firm orientation, resolved their conflicts, left Germany, and settled in Israel for good. Others decided to stay where they were born and had grown up: a few preferred to settle in other countries in West Europe, or else in the United States. The decision to stay in Germany was often based on the awareness — quite often a rationalization of some kind or another — that West Germany, after all, was one of the most liberal West European societies, and enjoyed incontestable civil rights. It was a modern society, and secure both socially and politically. This made it easier for them to decide to stay where their family and friends lived, and where they had grown up, read German literature and acquired German culture. For them, Germany, as one of my patients put it, was "[our] country and yet, at the same time, with its Nazi past, not [our] country".

Many of those who decided to stay felt "that after all I can get away at any time I want", "that I can leave immediately, if any serious signs of Nazism recurred", or "if the Nazis returned to power", "if my family and myself were endangered".

The considerations of some of my patients revealed the latent conflict in their decision to stay on as survivors and members of the second generation in Germany. Accordingly, any neo-Nazi-activity inside Germany, and any latent or overt anti-Semitic manifestation, naturally gave rise to intense concern and conflict, and often made questionable their decision to stay and live in Germany.

Nevertheless, for many of those survivors, and their offspring, who had decided to stay and live in Germany, personal and professional success, and increasing political and economic stability in West Germany, from the Sixties to the Eighties, tended to confirm their decision. In the second half of the Eighties, the anti-Semitic nature of a play by Fassbinder led to public demonstrations by the greater part of the Jewish community in Frankfurt, and prevented presentation of this play. This was one of the

first major public demonstrations of the Jewish community in Frankfurt. It was an event that underlined the importance of Jews and Jewish interests in the political and cultural life of the city. The demonstration reinforced the identification of many Jews with the life of the Jewish community in Germany. They became an integrated group that more and more speak up in regard to the German past and present. They constitute a kind of memory opposed to the tendency to forget characterising German society as a whole. The Jewish community in this way contributes to the political and cultural life of West Germany. Nazis and neo-Nazis rejected this kind of communal memory, but other Germans, especially the second- and third-generation growing up in post-war Germany, were deeply receptive to it.

The tearing down of the Berlin Wall, the end of the Cold War, and of the division of Germany, challenged political orientations that had seemed stable for many till then. For many survivors and their offspring, old wounds were opened. They had again to come to terms with the fact that they were Jewish survivors living in post-war Germany. For many, this sudden collapse of the Berlin Wall, and the reunification of the divided German nation, came as a shock, as something that shattered the compromises they had arrived at. Many felt that this startling new event would undo all that had happened, that, as one of my patients put it, “50 years later they get everything back”. As another patient put it, one would only have to wait and see what was going to happen in the course of time. “Eventually, they will get back even the former German territories that are now Polish”.

Many found stability in the political and cultural division of Germany, in the sense of the projective solutions discussed. They experienced, as many Western Germans did, a severe weakening of their orientation which had been based on projection.

One of my patients, whose father’s first wife and two children had been murdered in Auschwitz, and who remarried after the war, and had another two children, retained this projective orientation in a remarkable manner. He had begun to like living in Germany. “In spite of everything, where else can I go? My family and friends live here, my father is buried here, I would only leave if the country became politically insecure”.

His attitude was buttressed by the fact that his wife owned the passport of a larger Western country “where I can go any time things get dangerous”. Before Germany had been reunified, he had visited Eastern Berlin a number of times, and found the Communist state “disgusting, like

Nazi Germany. On my visits there I had felt always that it was just one visit, that I could leave immediately, if I wanted to go to the Western part, where I felt much more safe". This perspective on divided Germany could no longer be maintained after Germany was reunified. Since then, he had carefully avoided visits to any part of former Eastern Germany. However, he was a businessman and could not afford to continue like this.

Some three years after reunification, he had to go to Dresden to negotiate a deal there. He fell into a sudden panic that forced him to leave immediately. He raced home on the motorway, and felt secure only "when I had passed the border" — the former border between East and West Germany. But there was no border any more!

Later, reflecting on this experience with me, he realized that the confrontation with the German past in this large Eastern German city, especially with its architecture, and the residue of the Communist regime, had overwhelmed him because of something he had warded off a long time. (The architecture had remained untouched because of the non-investment policies of the communist state.) His solution to this acute crisis was an attempt at re-splitting and re-projection: Crossing the border that no longer existed meant to him to be "safe again at the place where I live and where I feel at home. I know it is silly but I had the thought of never going there again". This almost traumatic revelation of a projective solution tended also to shape the transferential situation in his psychoanalytic treatment with me as a non-Jewish German analyst, in the sense that his visit to me tended to be a "visit to Dresden". The more this conflict came to the fore in the development of the transference, the more it could be worked through, which helped this patient to integrate and find creative solutions for himself, especially in connection with burdening conflicts that had been transgenerationally transmitted.

The intensification of nationalist tendencies after the end of the Cold War, especially in Southern and Eastern Europe, the rise of fascist and neo-Nazi movements in West Europe and in Germany, and assaults on foreigners in re-unified Germany, nourish fantasies and fears of a regression to the Nazi past. These events have again presented the survivors and offspring with the question that has remained basic to Jews living in post-war Germany, that is, how to define that point where life in post-war Germany would become intolerable, and they would have to leave.

As one survivor of Auschwitz observed: "Can I assume responsibility for the dead when living in a country where anti-Semitic and Nazi-like

tendencies expose themselves?" It is possible that it is not these alarming events and phenomena alone that cause concern. The weak reactions of local, state and federal governments also cause concern. The hesitant reaction, the failure to cope with and to define events that are, after all, openly discussed by only a fraction of the German people — this failure to respond vigorously reveals the deeply unresolved and permanently present past within the German nation today. It has prevented many survivors and their offspring from resolving their conflicts, and coming to terms with their problem of living, as Jews, in post-war Germany.