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VERGANGENHEITS-BEWÄLTIGUNG!

Germans are so obsessed with confronting their collective past that they even have a word for it. Now there's a new generation of immigrants that wants no part of it, and isn't shy about saying so

BY STACY PERMAN

On a noisy stretch of Maybachufer Strasse, just across the canal from the lively working-class neighborhood of Kreuzberg, Berlin's bustling open-air Turkish market unfolds, just as it does every Tuesday and Friday. Here in this densely populated district, better known as Little Istanbul, the aroma of spices, coffee, and grilled kebab scent the streets. Blocks of white salted cheese, pyramids of cumin, mounds of olives, stacked boxes of çay, and the short, curved tea glasses in which it's traditionally served are sold briskly under tented stalls. All along the canal, the sounds of Turkish and some Arabic drown out whatever German can be heard. A mix of men and women casually dressed in jeans, as well as women modestly covered in hijab, jostle and shop among the selection of toys, cutlery, bolts of fabric, and array of fashionable head scarves.

Progressive Germans like to point to these districts and the quaint scene of Turkish coffeehouses, halal butchers, and Anatolian travel agencies as examples of their modern, multicultural society. But another sort of reality can be found along these streets and around the graffiti-scarred buildings. The writing on some of these walls, literally speaking, or on the flyers that can be found in the area, broadcasts a flagrant hostility toward Israel and the kind of virulent anti-Semitism once considered unthinkable in postwar Germany — at least in public. In addition to politically charged messages such as "Zionists out of Palestine," there are stark and random proclamations: "Death to Jews" or "Death to Israel." Occasionally, the errant swastika can be found. As I waited for the metro in the subterranean stop at Kottbusser Tor, I turned my back to a wall on which a Star of David was scrawled; above it were scribbled the cryptic words "Fascists 2 Ashes."

But perhaps nowhere is this sentiment more evident than in the mandatory Holocaust studies classes in the neighborhood high schools. The classes, taught all across Germany as part of the history curriculum, are part of a broader national project, launched after World War II, and specifically since the 1960s, to institutionalize the memory of the Holocaust. To that end, there is capacious documentation on the public record and in government and academic institutions regarding the tragedy wrought on European Jewry. Entire archives are dedicated to the Nazi regime. Certainly there is no shortage of films or television documentary programs, newspaper articles, or books on the Holocaust, or for that matter, on current anti-Semitism. Former concentration camps are now memorials, museums, and education sites that scores of German students visit every year on field trips.

But now a growing number of Germany's young Muslims are questioning, resisting, and

even rejecting Holocaust studies. They bitterly denounce Jews and Israel and lionize Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. Some frequently disrupt efforts to teach them about the Holocaust and refuse to partake in official Holocaust commemorations. And teachers, increasingly, are throwing up their hands in despair.

It's a phenomenon that is as troubling as it is knotty. The surge in anti-Semitic behavior is taking place among third- and fourth-generation immigrant children, mostly of Arab or Palestinian backgrounds, but also of Turkish descent — kids who've been born in Germany, and in some cases whose parents have been born here. Among these youth, the word *Jew,* once decorously silenced in this country, is regularly used as an insult. Many of them talk about the Holocaust as something of a Jewish falsehood, an exaggeration that's part of a Zionist conspiracy to create a justification for Israel. Many simply do not identify with this chapter of German history, especially amid their own galaxy of national conflicts and internecine struggles.

"I was doing a workshop once," says Elif Kayi, who works with Berlin's Arab, Turkish, and Muslim youth at the grassroots organization Kreuzberg Initiative Against Anti-Semitism (KIGA), "and I heard a student say that Jews should be gassed." Kayi watched as the teacher stood by in stony silence. When she asked the instructor later why he didn't respond, "he said that he'd heard such things before, but that he didn't react to avoid a conflict," she recalls. That's a shocking observation in a country that has made the Holocaust and confrontation of its Nazi past something of a national assignment, not to mention the cornerstone of a re-education program. It's a shift that reveals a tangle of social issues that on closer inspection raises nearly as many questions about German society as a whole as it does about its Muslim minority.

Tülay Bilgen is a bright woman, born in Berlin to Turkish parents; she speaks German, Turkish, and more than passable English. She is a program coordinator at the nonprofit, nonpartisan Institute for Cultural Diplomacy. An observant Muslim who wears the head scarf, she was expecting her first child when we first met, at a café in Kreuzberg not far from where she lives. When I described to her a short catalogue of anti-Semitic incidents and attitudes attributed to young Muslims, she was astonished. "That was not my experience," she told me.

When Bilgen went to high school some ten years ago in Kreuzberg, students of German descent still made up the majority, and talking publicly *and* negatively about Jews was relatively taboo all over Germany. Bilgen said that she was quite affected when her class watched films and learned about National Socialism. "The pictures were unbelievable," she later told me. "It didn't matter if you were Turkish or German, everybody felt bad and couldn't believe their eyes at what had happened. My opinion hasn't changed today," she added, "and it won't. It is impossible to find the right expression for this brutality, this genocide."

She was surprised to hear of the dramatic shift in attitude within her community, though not long after our first meeting, she e-mailed me to say she did recall an incident in which her nine-year-old nephew Halil insulted his cousin by calling him a "Jew." "I asked Halil immediately what he meant with that word, and the answer was, 'I don't know,'" she wrote. "I asked him where he learned this expression, and he said, 'At school. Everybody uses it.'"

Bilgen admitted afterward that she does see a certain schadenfreude in the Muslim community when it comes to the Holocaust. "The topic of Israel and Palestine is a sensitive topic," she told me. "The reality is that there is an anger that grows against the Jews because of the politics in Israel." Now the anger is transmogrifying. While the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has always been highly politicized, the "Nazification" of Israel was simply not as constant or widespread as it is today, with frequently asserted comparisons of the Gaza Strip to the Warsaw Ghetto, Israeli army checkpoints to Nazi roundup points, or Ariel Sharon to Adolf Hitler.

But the shift is about more than solidarity with Palestine. If you pull a tiny thread from the sleeve of the situation, what unravels is a complicated reality. Caught in the middle of two cultures, neither of which they feel a particular sense of belonging to, young Muslim immigrants are increasingly taking on the umbrella identity of radicalized Arab or Muslim, conflating Israel, Jews, and the Holocaust with their own sense of isolation as the lens for viewing the world.

Most of the immigrants live in big cities such as Hamburg and Cologne. The largest number is settled around Berlin, in Kreuzberg and the nearby districts of Neukölln and Wedding that fan out to the north of the capital, and Friedrichshain in the southeast. The communities are made up mostly of Turks who came to Germany as cheap manual labor — euphemistically called guest workers — beginning in the 1950s, and of their children and grandchildren. In recent years, ethnic Kurds, Arabs from North Africa, Palestine, and Syria, and Muslims from Iran and Bosnia have joined them, mostly as political and economic refugees, some illegally. They exist for the most part in cultural and social isolation in what is described as a *Parallelgesellshaft* — a parallel society. Unemployment in these neighborhoods is as high as 50 percent, and high school dropout rates run at about 30 percent — the consequence of Germany's longtime reluctance to integrate its immigrant population.

Disenfranchised, angry, and frustrated at their treatment as second-class citizens, and often the target of racism, youngsters in these communities are resorting to a diet of jingoistic antagonisms. With little education or understanding of German history or Middle Eastern affairs, they are exposed to a barrage of brutal images of Israeli troops, as well as to the kind of vehemently anti-Semitic propaganda programming regularly shown in Arab and Muslim countries. In fact, much of the material is broadcast directly into Germany via cable and satellite TV channels, such as Hezbollah's Beirut-based satellite station, Al-Manar, which is banned in the U.S. and other countries, including France and Spain. Last summer, a popular Iranian TV series was on heavy rotation on a Turkish cable channel; called *Zahra's Blue Eyes,* it was about a Palestinian girl who is kidnapped by an Israeli army captain so that he can steal her eyes for his own blind child. Also popular was the blockbuster Turkish import film *Valley of the Wolves,* which featured the atrocities of U.S. troops in Iraq, Jews infiltrating Turkey, and a Jewish doctor who exports the organs of Muslim prisoners to America and Israel.

However, to deduce that what is happening within Germany's Muslim community is merely a cultural export is to see only part of the story. These developments actually reflect a maelstrom of critical social issues unfolding in broader German society. While not a few in the Muslim community have come to see Jews as a privileged minority whose history takes up a considerable amount of the country's consciousness, so do a number of Germans. "You can't just blame the images on Al-Manar," explains Dr. Andreas Zick, a social psychiatrist at the University of Bielefeld's Institute for Interdisciplinary Research on Conflict and Violence. When it comes to Israel, he says, these views "are reinforced in German media. They are just not as vulgar."

"It is a pity how the Jews suffered, but isn't it just awful what they are doing to the Palestinians?" This comment or a variation of it can be found in the guest book of any number of Jewish or Nazi-related sites in the country. Indeed, a recent University of Bielefeld survey revealed that 50 percent of those interviewed compared Israel's policy toward the Arabs with the Nazi treatment of the Jews. One former Berlin schoolteacher, Rosa Fava, who is now a concentration-camp guide, told me a Muslim girl once asked her, "Why should one prosecute old Nazis while nothing is done in Israel?" It was a view that she found not all that remarkable. "I have heard such examples," Fava says, "but they are not really different concerning Israel from what sometimes even teachers say."

If you were to ask Germans if they as a nation have dealt with the Nazi era, most would respond resoundingly in the affirmative. One of the most conspicuous aspects of German identity is a fundamental preoccupation with remembering the past, and an ongoing struggle to confront it. There is even a word for doing so: *Vergangenheitsbewältigung.* Several Germans have remarked to me that their nation is nothing like Austria, a country that still views itself as a victim of the Nazis rather than as an accomplice. And in part they are right. No other country has done as much to look squarely into the face of its darkest

impulses. In 1995 the government officially sanctioned Holocaust Remembrance Day. Two years ago, after torturous debate, a national monument, the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe, composed of 2,700 sunken granite slabs, was unveiled over five acres in central Berlin.

Even as the events that took place between 1933 and 1945 recede deeper into history, an ongoing excavation of the past continues, churning up new and disturbing facts and arguments. Daniel Goldhagen's 1996 book *Hitler's Willing Executioners,* which indicted all Germans in the atrocities of the 1940s, while highly criticized, was a best seller here. And the corrosive myth that only the SS, not the Wehrmacht (the wartime armed forces), carried out atrocities was shattered when the controversial exhibition Crimes of the Wehrmacht traveled across the country beginning in the late 1990s. So captivated was the country by the film *Schindler's List* that in 1998 the government awarded director Steven Spielberg the Great Cross of Merit with Star for his "very noticeable contribution to the issue of the Holocaust."

And yet for all the lamentation, commemoration, and education, consider the following. On the eve of the sixtieth anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz in 2005, a poll was conducted by the public broadcast station ZDF, the daily *Die Welt,* and the independent research institute Forschungsgruppe Wahlen; it reported that one out of every two young Germans under the age of twenty-four could not correctly define what the Holocaust was.

Moreover, many young Germans have felt compelled to draw a line under history, stopping at the year 1945. Living in the twenty-first century, they no longer want to apologize for the events of the twentieth, or remain shamefaced and burdened with the crimes of their grandparents and great-grandparents — particularly in light of what they view as other nations' atrocities of a more recent vintage: American abuses in Guantánamo Bay, the invasion of Iraq, the treatment of native Americans, and of course Palestine.

This was underscored when the prominent German novelist Martin Walser accepted the Frankfurt Book Fair Peace Prize in 1998. In his censorious speech, Walser called Auschwitz a "moral cudgel" against Germans. He rebuked the "Holocaust industry" and condemned what he termed the "exploitation of our disgrace for present purposes." It was a watershed moment, for many said that Walser, a member of the intelligentsia, had the courage to finally admit publicly what so many had been thinking privately.

The situation takes another complicated turn when you factor in the former East Germany, where postwar history rallied around the idea that communism had liberated the people from fascism. Here, Holocaust denial is pervasive, neo-Nazism is on the rise, and anti-Semitism runs high, as does anti-foreigner sentiment. Last year, the former communist state of Saxony Anhalt was the scene of two particularly ugly incidents. In the small town of Parey, three teenagers forced another student to wear a sign with the Nazi-era message "In this town I'm the biggest swine because of the Jewish friends of mine." In the village of Pretzen, more than 100 neo-Nazis joined a village bonfire, shouting, *"Sieg Heil"* as they threw copies of *The Diary of Anne Frank* into the flames.

One might think that's exactly the kind of thing that would pop up in classroom discussions about anti-Semitism and the Holocaust. That is not exactly the case. "[We] learn not about anti-Semitism as racism but only about anti-Semitism during World War II," explains Julianne Wetzel, a research associate at the Center for Research on Anti-Semitism at the Technical University in Berlin. The Holocaust is most often talked about dispassionately in the abstract, as if the whole period and the events — the war, the Jews, the Nazis — were something that was mounted on a wall or installed behind glass. There is very little discussion about the connection to what the country faces today. And while most Germans would probably describe recent events as the raving xenophobia of right-wing extremists, most still define anti-Semitism in Nazi-era terminology. "Jews are always seen as victims, never as people," says Wetzel.

Indeed, during these postwar decades, Germans have been taught that it is wrong to talk negatively of Jews, but not necessarily why. Many Germans proudly told me that Germany is not as anti-Semitic as France, with its rampant physical attacks against Jews and firebombing of synagogues. But anti-Semitism here just manifests itself in other forms of subtlety.

Olaf Kistenmacher is a historian who gives tours of the former Nazi prison camp Neuengamme, near Hamburg. When he talks with German student groups, he told me, they often start a discussion about Jews. "They want to know how many died here and why they didn't fight," he said. It is not uncommon, he said, for them to tell him that Jews are rich. "When I ask them why they think that Jews are rich, they tell me that is what their teachers told them." He traced the line of reasoning that tends to follow. "If Jews were rich then they were responsible for being hated," he explained. "The kids learn that Jews were hated by the Nazis because they were rich."

When I asked third-generation Germans if they had ever discussed the Holocaust or the role their relatives may have played in it, I received mixed reactions. Few were told directly about these things, but many had heard about the manifold suffering of their families: the hunger, the bombings, the loss of material comforts. One German told me his grandmother described how the streets around her had melted. "A lot of people simply don't deal with it, explains Gerhard Schick, a Cologne-based documentary filmmaker. "There is a big difference between knowing the facts about Auschwitz and admitting this was something horrible and also admitting that this is part of your personal history."

And so while Germany's record on national accountability is laudable, it is perhaps somewhat misleading as well. More than half a century after the Holocaust, Jews are still considered an anomaly. Every formal Jewish institution exists behind a fortress of state-of-the-art security, including a cordon of uniformed German Polizei. Furthermore, despite a population of some three million Muslim immigrants, many of whom span multiple generations in the country, a very real debate continues here about who is a German and who is a foreigner.

Just outside southwestern Berlin, near the banks of the Wannsee Lake, is an elegant gated villa with manicured gardens and a long, curved drive. Originally built as the residence for a prosperous Berlin merchant, it became the site where Reinhard Heydrich and a group of prominent Nazis gathered to draw up plans for the "Final Solution" in 1942. Since 1992, it has been used as a memorial and educational site, offering workshops to youth groups and classes studying National Socialism and the persecution of European Jews.

Wannsee receives lots of immigrant kids, and Elke Gryglewski, a warm but no-nonsense political scientist who is one of the center's educators, explains that over the past four years she has noticed what she calls a kind of a competition over historical discourse. The Holocaust, mixed up with the broader conflicts in the Middle East, serves as the catalyst. "Some [immigrant] kids have a high level of empathy for the Jewish population during National Socialism," she explains. "In a way they've experienced racism here in Germany and can well imagine better than Germans can what it means to be discriminated against." But visiting the site also raises other questions about their own stories. In the case of Palestinian refugees, she says, "There is a big debate over history. They want to know who should be guilty for the expulsion of Palestinians." Young kids, she says, "have their own traumas that are passed through generations. Then there is what they are learning in school. They see what is important in this society, and sometimes they do things to provoke and get attention for their own history."

Following the events of September 11, 2001, Gryglewski heard Arab children taking credit for the terror attacks. "They said, 'It was me, I did it,'" she recalls. In many cases, she says, "their behavior was a cry for attention." Generally, though, Gryglewski says, problematic behavior is a relatively rare occurrence at the Wannsee center because the educators have worked to identify reactions. "We translate our information into Arabic and Turkish," she tells me. "We want them to know what is here." As well, they offer the students documents and material relating to the issues in the countries from where they have come. "When they feel accepted," she says, "they are more willing to deal with the Holocaust."

Unfortunately, few of the nation's Holocaust studies programs take that kind of approach. Classes are still largely based on a West German

model of re-education, meant by and large for a homogeneous student population: the children and grandchildren of Nazi perpetrators and victims. It has yet to adapt to a multicultural society or to cope with rising right-wing extremism. There is no centralized curriculum. The scope and breadth of studies is left up to the sixteen German *Länder,* or states, which in turn may leave it to the discretion of individual teachers. There are many dedicated teachers and activists committed to Holocaust studies. Still, a number describe a curriculum badly in need of reform. The average age of instructors is fifty; there is an emphasis on horribly graphic images and statistics.

As well, a number of teachers complain that they have little institutional support to deal with racism in the classroom. Frustrated and under pressure, some gloss over the subject, simply excuse these students from participation, or even cancel classes on the topic. But when teachers allow Muslim students to be excused from Holocaust lessons or tell them that it isn't necessary for them to participate, for instance, in official Kristallnacht commemoration, they are actually sending a very dangerous message. For one, they are reinforcing the students' prejudice. But they are also telling the kids that they are not full-fledged members of German society.

"It is wrong to tell Muslims that this doesn't concern them. It is necessary to be aware of history, of mankind," Turkish-born Sanem Kleff told me. Kleff was a middle-school teacher in Berlin for twenty years and is now the director of the School Without Racism, an alliance of public schools in Berlin. She thinks what is going on is actually part of a larger failure. "Most of these teachers are not prepared to handle the issue of Islamism. They don't know enough about it. But those children are still in our society, even if those teachers are not willing to work with them. And if teachers don't do it, there are a lot of outside Islamist organizations that have their arms open to them. It is a very dangerous situation."

On a spectacularly hot afternoon, I returned to Kreuzberg to the KIGA offices to learn more about this group of Turkish and Muslim Germans that works in the community to fight against anti-Semitism. It has had Muslim youth role-play the events that led to the establishment of the State of Israel (imagine a Palestinian playing David Ben-Gurion) and taken young Turkish- and Kurdish-born Germans to Auschwitz. I met with a twenty-three-year-old woman named Maja, who insisted on using only her first name. Maja is studying to be an elementary schoolteacher, and when we met, she was working on a short training course at the center. It was a sweltering day, and the air was so oppressively thick that we moved to a narrow balcony facing the inner courtyard of the building to catch a slight breeze. Raised in Berlin by Syrian parents, Maja sighed and waved her hands while talking about the anti-Semitic and anti-Israel views she hears often. "If you don't think for yourself, you will only see superficial prejudices," she told me. When I asked her why she wanted to work against anti-Semitism in her community, she told me that she needed to learn how to effectively deal with young people when it came up. "If I want to work with young people, anti-Semitism is a problem," she told me. Besides, she added, it would help her later, serving as a cultural springboard. "Islamophobia is a problem, too, among immigrants and Germans," she told me. "How will I be able to deal with Islamophobia?"

Listening to Maja I was reminded of a speech that Wolfgang Thierse, then president of the German Bundestag, gave four years ago on Holocaust Remembrance Day. "It is my conviction that commemoration, while being a process that is inherently painful, is also something that constantly reminds us of our responsibility in the present," he said. Germany has worked hard to exorcise the demons of its past. Now it needs to turn and face the way those demons continue to impact the realities of today. &

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