

Meeting between contemporary witnesses of the Shoah and young persons from Eastern Germany – History and recollection in the dialogue of the generations and in youth-exchange

Translated by Bergit Doege

1. Recollection is, as a rule, not redeeming but absolutely necessary for the future's sake

About five years ago, I visited an exhibition about the history of the municipal districts of Berlin. The department of the district of "Neukölln" showed many important details from the history of this district. Suddenly I stopped in front of a photograph of a protestant pastor. The photograph was old – maybe shot about the time of 1936. It showed the face of an intellectual, of a pastor in his special clothing. The man was wearing narrow edged glasses and appeared interesting. Anyhow, I was interested in him and read what was written next to the picture. This person belonged to the so-called "Deutsche Christen" (German Christians). He was radically anti-Semitic, a man of the SA, and – being a pastor and a man of the SA at the same time – he lighted and destroyed the synagogue at the "Fränkelufer" in the district of "Kreuzberg" in the night from November 9th to November 10th, together with his SA-platoon. Later he often boasted of that deed, said the text next to the picture. Below the picture was the name of that pastor: Walter Steiner. While reading the name, I got shocked.

Walter Steiner was the name of that protestant pastor from whom I got my religious education, my confirmation and my consecration. There is a photograph from 1957, from the day of the consecration, where Walter Steiner visited our family. He sat in the midst of our family. My radically atheistic father talked friendly to him – and my religious grandmother as well. They did not know anything about his biography. Both of them probably could not have beared his presence if they had known who had been sitting next to them. My father, who belonged to the area of a communist cell from the "Weimarer Republik" (the Weimar Republic) on until the end of the war – with Jewish friends whom they helped to survive, if I interpreted the signals correctly – and my grandmother coming from a half-caste branch of our family, according to Nazi-categories. My father fell out with his brother in 1939 when the brother came back from Poland and reported what they had done there with the Jews. My aunt, the sister of my father, told me about that in 1984 – years after my father's death – still trembling from excitement. Since then, the contact between the two brothers had been broken off. The brother of my father was interned in the soviet special camp of former "KZ Sachsenhausen" after 1945 (as being a member of the NSDAP and of the SA), where he died in 1947.

But in 1957 my father, pastor Walter Steiner and my grandmother sat together and talked about all the world and his wife and certainly about me, too because I was the object of the day. Pastor Steiner had consecrated me in the morning with a word from the New Testament: "Fight the good fight of faith and grasp for eternal life to which you are destined and confessed a good denomination in presence of many witnesses."

Even today the shock hits me when I think about who consecrated me there. I am filled with a feeling of disgust, hostility and pain.

Until the exhibition five years ago, this day of consecration was no important day for me in the end – if I remember correctly, it was not interesting for me being a teenager, not so good, not very pleasant but no shock. Today, five years after this shock, this recollection occupies myself, makes me sit up and take notice and gives me distrust in view of the concealed persons of history.

This memory took away, among other things, the impartiality in the contact with people of the elder generation in Germany.

That this recollection is neither redeeming nor a release is confirmed, above all, by heavily traumatized persons.

People who suffered from and survived the Shoah have to live with this appalling, dreadful experience until death, even if their lives got back on the right and calm track after this experience.

People who had been heavily maltreated and tormented during their childhood – on whatsoever conditions – never lose this trauma in their whole life. It is also difficult for them to break away from the “violence-pattern” of their childhood.

I knew an elderly woman who, at the end of the war, had been raped by five soldiers in the presence of her small children, her seriously handicapped brother and her old and sick mother. She was occupied by this experience to the last breath and had reported only very sparse and very late about it. She was seriously traumatized.

Quite a few people are able to repress the traumatizing experiences, but nevertheless these experiences determine their character. Others never manage it – they live as broken characters. Hopefully, apart from the trauma, other positive experiences occur which may relativize the traumatization – but it will never be totally removed. Nevertheless it is, first of all – or only, the recollection that opens a new access to the reality of life, that is to say the work and again the deepened work on the traumatizing experiences.

But there are so serious traumas that can never be relieved by anyone, for example the Shoah. Edith Wolf for instance, this brave woman who had organized the life of the hidden group in Berlin since 1942, was terribly maltreated and tortured in the KZ (Concentration Camp). She died four years ago in her parental home in Haifa and, being an old lady over ninety years, she often had to speak, again and again, about her dreadful torture pains. The trauma of her torture was too heavy. The recollection was neither pleasant for her nor for the others who had listened to her. But she had to report her experiences and the others wanted to know about it. The memory of Edith Wolf was essential for herself, frightening and burdening at the same time.

That was the brutal truth to give up to, a reality of which a repetition has to be averted in any case. That is to say: This recollection is also important for today and tomorrow.

Furthermore we know that the following generations participated in the traumatizations especially of the related persons of the generations before them. They are involved in the history of them and are not able to shake it off.

Research of history, recollection and the handling of experiences of the ancestors are inevitable for them, necessary to find new accesses to life. That this process may also lead into deep crisis is known by anyone who ever accompanied people during such processes. That applies to the victims’ side – without any restriction.

That applies, in another way, also to the descendants of the perpetrators – the obvious and the hidden and concealed ones.

A young woman, who suddenly discovered the biography of her SS-father, including the entanglement and the actions of her whole family, and made it a topic and worked on it, got into a deep life-crisis because of her family who was not willing to bear this reappraisal, and also personally with regard to her own identity.

A grandchild of an important SS-figure wanted to take his own life after he had found out who his grandfather was.

Such recollections are not convenient at all, they may be even agonizing, but the confrontation with reality is inevitable after having taken notice of it. If there are any new accesses to life, they are each connected with the work of recollection.

2. The young generation, the neo-Nazis and ways to democracy in Germany

Since 1982 I have been living in the area of Oranienburg near Berlin. There I live and experience the situation in Brandenburg, that is in the Eastern part of Germany, in the so-called “neuen Bundesländer” (former East Germany). I feel and know the state of political and public opinion quite well, I know that moroseness grows in view of social problems, including unemployment, and how many questions there are considering the arrangement of democratic life etc.

I know groupings that have radical right-wing tendencies and I have tried for years to work with them in order to break them away from these fixations, for example within the framework of school projects or in youth-working.

Since the middle 80's we have been observing this scene very strictly and got relatively clear about their motives and backgrounds. The modernization of society and the disintegration-processes caused through it, connected with an ideological way to transfigure and excess the Nazi-history, is the breeding ground for right-wing tendencies of radicalisation, for offers of seemingly simple black-and-white solutions that are dubious in every respect.

Old Nazis provide the ideology, the falsification of history as well as money and logistics. I know what I am talking about. In 1992 the hut of Jewish inmates of the KZ in Oranienburg-Sachsenhausen has been destroyed and there is undoubtedly a confusing-oppressive-complicated political milieu in Germany that tolerates such acts, despite the clear official political dissenting voices that can fortunately also be heard. In this context I found it difficult to bear the comments like the one from the author Martin Walser at the speech for the peace-prize award of the German book trade. Norman Finkelstein influences in an even more problematic way the consciousness of young people with his “Holocaust-Industry” – just in the phase of the development of their identity and, above all, in their historical indistinctness and their non-knowledge.

A survey among young persons in Brandenburg – within the framework of a study of comparison between North-Rhine-Westphalia and Brandenburg – came to the result that one has to speak of 27 % of the juveniles from Brandenburg that have an anti-Semitic attitude (North-Rhine-Westphalia 10 %). This is a clear signal on which we have to react consequently and in different ways, even if there is another, more open attitude among the majority of the young persons.

But the figure 27 % indicates a future threat and therefore represents a great challenge.

On the other hand one can take it as a starting point that amongst the majority of the young people today, the openness for other cultures and different attitudes towards life is growing, too.

The European integration will, with no doubt, bring about a more liberal-minded attitude to young people, on the other hand it will also cause fear and uncertainty to another part of them. What still goes on to have an effect on the Eastern part of Germany is the intercultural inexperience and the almost total interreligious-cultural ignorance of many educationalists and subsequently of the students and pupils, too, although great efforts have been made on the part of the persons responsible to get connected and close the gaps.

Since the reunification of Germany a permanent, basic problem is the high unemployment rate of many young persons as well. For many people it feels like a devaluation of their own life.

Therefore there is a nostalgically transfiguration of the “DDR” (GDR) in parts of the population of East Germany, despite the clear improvement of life-quality since the reunification.

This is even more displeasing since the GDR was, without doubt, an anti-democratic, dictatorial, inhuman state that evaded from every democratic control and could only preserve its power and rule with the help of its tyrannical system and the state security service.

The population of East Germany had to bear not only the dictatorship of the Nazis, but also the forty years of GDR-dictatorship that followed, and not without consequences; the aim of getting an approval on democracy and of democratic shaping and participation of society is still far away and no topic for many people.

In the Western part of Germany, the democratisation was carried out, condescendingly or from the outside, by the Allies after 1945; in the Eastern part of Germany, many people wanted the reunification of Germany in the end, but they have not shared or shaped the democratic revolution of 1989. Democracy came as a “present”, as an incomprehensible and unsolvable challenge and unreasonable demand for most of the people after the reunification; before 1989 they have neither demanded nor risked life or anything else for it.

In the end it was a cognitive minority that wanted the democratisation, and with a high personal commitment and the favourable constellation of foreign policy as well as the economic breakdown of the GDR, the change could be effected.

A decisive symptom of the society of the GDR was the destruction of the critical, public political consciousness by permanent observation through the “Staatssicherheit” (State Security Service).

From young persons, beginning at the age of thirteen, to people from all walks of life and from several standards of education, were recruited as informers and as such they have been blackmailed to further collaboration again and again.

The poisoning of private and public life by the distrust that arose in the population, was a treacherous, revealing stigma of the GDR.

But another symbol of the GDR-society was more shaping in public: the “Als-ob-Deklaration” (as-if-declaration).

In the ideology it was declared that everybody had equal rights,

a “socialist community of humans” was declared,

equal opportunities on principle, an internationalist – solidarity showing – openness as well as freedom to form and express one’s own opinion, free and independent elections and freedom of the press were also declared.

The GDR was a “as-if-society”, where many people were aware of the fact that the declaration had nothing to do with reality.

In the end it was one reason why three million people hastened to leave the GDR.

The political elite of the later GDR saw itself as a part of the anti-fascist resistance and as “Allies of the Allies” long before May 8th 1945 - for the most part even with justification.

As an evidence served the custody and assassination of communists, the emigration of communist leaders to the Soviet-Union; in the Soviet-Union the cooperation in the national committee “Freies Deutschland” (Free Germany) etc. in the battle against Hitler-Germany.

The communist resistance was valued as the most consequent resistance against National Socialism.

After the victory of the Allies – and especially after the foundation of the GDR – this self-understanding of the communist, political elite had been applied to the entire population of the GDR. The GDR was *the* antifascist German state according to the self-interpretation of the political leadership.

Between 1945 and 1949 there had been also a consequent prosecution of former Nazis in the GDR to come (SBZ), but sometimes with the help of dubious methods of the KGB and, simultaneously, with denunciation as well as physical elimination of the democratic rivals.

The GDR-leadership however made its peace with the “little Nazis” (“Die SED- Freund der kleinen PG’s” – The SED- Friend of the little PG’s { Party Members }- W. Leonhardt), integrated them in the political system and was not even afraid of any cooperation with former Nazi-leaders if it was useful for the political aim to extend the communist rule to all parts of Germany (e.g. the meeting in 1951 in Berlin between communist functionaries of the GDR

and former Nazi-leaders from West-Germany in order to prevent the west-integration of the BRD).

During all phases of GDR-history there had been a certain degree of neo-Nazi activities, which was well-known to the safety authorities and the leadership of the state. It had been denied and hushed up in public, with few exceptions and until the near end of the GDR (Movie-example “Unsere Kinder” – Our children, 1989). The leadership of the GDR dissociated itself from all variations of fascism, in public of its own state as well as in world public. This dissociation had been, so to speak, its basic confession.

At the same time it practiced its anti-democratic, dictatorial policy and built up “Stalinist” structures of government, e.g. it consistently denied the cooperation between Stalin and Hitler in 1939, it had denied and concealed the traditional and the actual Stalinist anti-Semitism and even practiced or tolerated it. Within its role in the “Warsaw Pact” the GDR represented a consistent anti-Israeli policy since 1952/53 and, as we know today, did not shrink from directly helping anti-Israeli-terrorists. The GDR had been the state with the highest hostility against Israel in Europe.

Until 1952/53 the correlation between the Shoah and the formation of the state of Israel had been known in the GDR and Israel enjoyed some kind of sympathy, because at that time there had been hope for a socialist solidarity between the socialist states and Israel against the feudal Arabic states. Later, this was no topic anymore.

In the later GDR it was partly not known anymore that Israel had things to do with Jews and with the genocide that Nazi-Germany had practiced. Israel was mainly considered as an imperialistic state, as the bridgehead of America.

The most problematic effect the GDR-time had on the self-consciousness of many former citizens of the GDR is, that they often carry the following conviction inside: “That was not our history at all. Hitler or the Nazis that had been fleeing to the western part of Germany, they are to blame, not ourselves, we had nothing to do with it!” They have, as a rule, not made a topic of their own history. They have identified themselves with the resistance fighters and with the victims. For many of them, the history of Nazi-Germany had been the history of other people and of another state.

3. Cooperation with contemporary witnesses in the work of remembrance

The cooperation with contemporary witnesses meanwhile has a long tradition in the work of political adult education and in the work of political youth education in Germany.

Arranged by many educational institutions as well as by trade unions, foundations and academies etc., events are taking place at these institutions, at institutions of the political public, at schools, at vocational colleges, at churches.

“We are the last, ask us questions” for example was the subject of two conferences in Berlin within the framework of the “evangelische Akademie Berlin-Brandenburg” (Protestant Academy of Berlin-Brandenburg) in 1997 and 1999 (with 80 and 40 participants) and there had been a forum that took place within the “evangelischer Kirchentag”

(Protestant day of the church) at Frankfurt/Main with several thousand young people from all parts of Germany in 2001.

- Contemporary witnesses are invited to Germany nowadays for lecture tours and to give lectures, because there is a clear realization that the time now really has to be used as long as this is still possible to ask them, to talk to them personally, to listen to them and to meet them at all.
- The authentic evidence, the subjective account, the personal report – these things are irreplaceable.

- The reports of contemporary witnesses are making it inevitably clear what had happened there and how the extermination of the Jewish people should have had taken place.
- The reports of contemporary witnesses are imparting the facts in a personal way, that means that this experience will be imparted humane and very intense and that is why it is more comprehensible for young persons.
- The lack of the ability to connect the inconceivable and incomprehensible figures with an individual fate will be surmounted – and both crime and the incomprehensible suffering can be identified and verified in person.
- The readiness for the assumption of responsibility, that no such things will ever happen again, that history will not repeat itself, arises from the personal meeting.

The conversations with contemporary witnesses have and have had very different forms.

- 1. Example:

In 1999 the conception for a conference looked like the following:

We are the last, ask us questions II

Shoah-experiences of contemporary witnesses in the dialogue of the generations, 16.-18.4.1999, Protestant Academy of Berlin- Brandenburg

Introduction: Extermination of the European Jewry – as reality, as a maniacal idea, as a consequence of a development being centuries old

Saturday: Dr. Jizchak Schwersenz

Jewish youth in the underground-resistance of Berlin

Simcha Landau

In Berlin – in the underground

Tamar Landau

From the camp in Poland on the death-march to Bergen-Belsen

And to Israel

Shlomo Wolkowicz

My grave at Zloczow

Dr. J. Stroumsa

From Greece to Auschwitz, to Israel

Sunday: Elisha Birnbaum

My way from Berlin – via Karlsbad-Prague – to Israel

Jizchak Zuckerkandel

The lasting pains of the Shoah

Final discussion: *Hope in the homeland of Israel – and the will to survive*

Besides there regularly are an amount of events with single contemporary witnesses – big, small, smallest places – at schools, churches and other institutions.

- As a 2.Example the following report:

MEETING WITH WITNESSES OF THAT TIME

November 11th 1997 in Herzberg (Mark)

November 12th 1997 in Marienthal (Mark)

November 13th 1997 in Lindow (Mark)

Participants in the discussion: Dr. Jizchak Schwersenz as a contemporary witness

The evening forum “Meeting with witnesses of that time” has found great interest this half-year – also in the municipalities and parishes of the district of

Granssee. Invited and involved were pupils, the community, adults, teachers, employees of the church – that is to say multipliers and juveniles of most different kinds.

All three events were well attended (35/25/20 persons) and the participants intensely got involved in the discussion, in Herzberg where Jizchak Schwersenz talked about the relationship between Jewry and Germans as well as in Marienthal, in the discussion about anti-Semitism, but also particularly in the meeting with the especially young people in Lindow.

It was clear to all partners of the discussion how important it now is to have a conversation with the contemporary witnesses. The time for meeting them is limited – and we should question the contemporary witnesses about it – “They are the last – ask them questions”

- 3. Example:

Youth meeting and seminar: Traditions of resistance and the courage of one's convictions of Jews, Poles and Germans

In March 1997 the “Evangelische Akademie in Berlin-Brandenburg” worked on the tradition of resistance of Poles, Jews and Germans, together with the Youth Education Centre of Kreisau and a group of Israelis (accompanied by Shlomo Wolkowicz). First we went to Kreisau in Poland from March 6th –11th where we also visited the “KZ Groß-Rosen”. Then, from March 11th – 16th , we were in Berlin at many places of assassination and destruction of human beings, but also at places of resistance against the Nazi-dictatorship. The Shoah, the greatest crime in the history of mankind, was always present as a traumatic and thematic counterpoint. There were many heated discussions those days, shock – pensiveness on all parts and an intensive learning from history – also about the requirements of present commitment to the peace process and to the building of confidence. In those days, a process of convergence and understanding was decisive and shaping. On March 10th we went to the memorial “Groß-Rosen”. For this day, the Israelis had – at first for themselves, for the remembrance – prepared a ceremony, like it happened on so many occasions. But in the past days everybody, also the Israelis, reached the conviction that it would be better if we arranged a ceremony together. So, the young people from Germany and the participants from Poland presented their texts in the common ceremony of remembrance at the place of murder/shooting in “Groß-Rosen”. That was very, very important for all participants.

Götz Kollé, a very young German participant, presented the following text: “ In this situation we sense a feeling of constriction. Constriction becomes consternation. On consternation will follow grief, anger and powerlessness. We allocate guilt in respect for the victims. Innumerable victims. On the other side there were the brutal perpetrators. We remain silent and feel paralysed. After more than 50 years – since the greatest crime in the history of mankind – we are standing here together, Poles, Jews and Germans. The impotence shall not mean capitulation to us. We rather want to try to use the consternation as a source of power for the resistance against any form of injustice. From the generation of victims and perpetrators new generations have come today – they have the common task to prevent crimes like the Holocaust. We commemorate the victims.”

From texts like these and from intensive discussions between the juveniles from Poland, Germany and Israel about the situation in Israel and Poland – also

with regard to the Polish anti-Semitism and the complicated situation in Israel – arose the will to pass a statement at the end of the days together. The young people made every effort for this statement and I would like to quote it here.

Statement of Kreisau and Berlin

We, members of the three nations of Poland, Israel and Germany met in Kreisau and Berlin to debate about our past and to work on it together. We worked on the past with the help of authentic contemporary witnesses. In those days it again became clear to us that it is our duty never to forget fascism, racism, the Shoah (Holocaust) and mass murder. Our aim is the prevention of a new tragedy of mankind. We learned that a dialogue between our nations is possible and also productive. That is why we hereby announce with our signature:

- 1. We want and will practice openness, listening and patience mutually*
- 2. We will not direct any accusations to the new generations in the nations with regard to the past*
- 3. Together we will put up resistance against racist and discriminating philosophies of life*
- 4. We will pass on the knowledge about the past*
- 5. We will carry our ideas and conclusions into our environment*
- 6. We will do all in our power to announce to everyone and everywhere that orders that injure basic human rights are illegal and must be regarded as such*
- 7. We stand up for it – and turn to educationalists and politicians to develop appropriate basic conditions to continue such meetings of the three nations*

Signatures of all participants are following.

I would like to emphasize especially the second point. The young people from Poland, Israel and Germany, who meanwhile discussed very controversial, reached an agreement about the following wording: “ We will not direct any accusations to the new generations in the nations with regard to the past.” I was touched personally by these words. They point to the future. They do not fade out the past – nothing is hushed up or played down. In future, it has to be dealt with the past as well. The memory is a source of the real lived and suffered life. But the young generations, these representatives of the young generation, realized that they have experienced a real new chance for meeting – of friendly cooperation and of friendly dealings with each other.

In autumn 1999 followed a trilateral seminar with Shlomo Wolkowicz, where the group of 10 Israeli, 10 Polish and 10 German students at first went to Zloczow, then to Krakau and Auschwitz, afterwards to Kreisau and Berlin and finally were together in Israel – including Massua and Yad Vashem. The subject of the seminar was: “ Remembrance for the future” and was for all participants an unforgettable experience for their further life.

The reason for the seminar was the 60th anniversary of the start of the war in 1939.

4. Work of remembrance, principles: Hope and responsibility – Ways and meaning of mediation and of meetings

In my opinion we have to confront ourselves with the current situation. The contemporary witnesses are growing older and are partly not able anymore to be partners of discussion. The middle generation is in part not affected directly and has another relation towards communicating the Shoah-experiences. The young generations in Israel and in Germany see the history and also the challenges of the future in a different light. That is why it is necessary

to enable a transfer of experiences to the next generation. How can that happen? At first it is important to realize that we now still have the chance to meet contemporary witnesses, to enable meetings for the youth, for us and for the contemporary witnesses. It is very important for me to emphasize here that, where contemporary witnesses still live amongst us, they ought to be questioned now. “ We are the last – ask us questions”. This is the present situation. That means: Question us for details, because tomorrow this personal questioning might not be possible anymore.

The other item that I would like to name especially is the work between the generations, the intergenerational work, that I want to put emphasis on for this whole field.

Youth-partnerships individually and the particular partnerships of the middle generation are very important. But the transfer to the next generation will only succeed if we include two or three generations in our work. In 1998 I finally managed it, after three attempts, to go to Israel with an inter-generational mixed group. Through it, we experienced most intensive discussions and meetings. All scepticism of the responsible, the sponsors and of the very experienced ones in partnership-work was put in the shade because of our gained experiences and became insignificant. The young generation held conversation with the elder generation and both made most important experiences together in Israel. The other thing also took place several times, that the Israeli partners were here in the families and that they really developed partnerships to an extent that we first did not think as probable or even possible. I want to emphasize, maybe even favour this point of view also for the local partnership and for the partnership between cities.

This work may gain a very great importance in future – that we involve the family business and stories in our conversations and meetings. With the inclusion of the family-stories, history is passed on more authentic and more vivid – what here happens then is a personal transfer to the next generation, not only from the generation of the grandparents to the grandchild-generation, but also to the middle generation that partly denies the examination or refuses the dealing with all these topics.

That means that here is to develop a special partnership-work to make meetings possible and to reduce prejudices in the meeting, in conversations, in the preliminary work before meetings, with all the necessary information and in joint actions.

Of course this requires very qualified leaders of group-meetings, too, who have confronted themselves intensively with these problems and who have knowledge and abilities for this work. The field of intercultural education, the acquisition of knowledge and the development of corresponding abilities belongs to it.

Therefore we still have long, complicated processes to await for us – I assume.

The prejudices, grown in decades, cannot be abolished with educational activities for several weeks, months or years. What really will be needed are long-term efforts. That means e.g.: We have different ground-works to do with disseminators, with a training for leaders of groups, for the exchange of teachers and qualified employees: The inclusion of memorials and educational institutions in the partnership-work offers many opportunities, as well as many forms of youth-exchange, of intergenerational work and many special, individual pilot-like projects do.

Both principles, hope and responsibility, should lead us when we develop the meeting- and partnership-work – of cities, in the field of schools, in the field of intergenerational work, in the cooperation between qualified employees of the youth-work.

We should not abandon our hopes, we should struggle for the hope that a new cooperation across the abyss of history will be possible.

In this work we are able to involve many people, give them new experiences and a new life, maybe new experiences of emergence.

We are to await new challenges in the face of the inclusion of former East Germany, and should react deliberately on it.

Some things will have to be tried out together and many people have not even activated their fantasy to walk bravely along a new path or to track them down.