



MY JOURNEY TO BERLIN: A PERSONAL TRAVELOGUE

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Preparations

This is a journey I've been imagining for the past twelve years. I realized then that I needed to come to Germany for the explicit purpose of having a conversation between Jews and Germans, but I had no idea where to start in manifesting this opportunity. In fact, I thought that no one would still be interested in this conversation – that people entitled to Holocaust-related trauma have already dealt with it, and that my own pain surrounding the events of the Holocaust were anomalous and probably either neurotic or psychotic. While I am sure there are people, even in my immediate family, for whom my interest in this topic is at least one of the above, a group has formed with the express purpose of facilitating this very conversation between 2nd and 3rd generation survivors/descendents of the Jews and Germans effected by the Holocaust.

In preparing for this adventure, there were several amazing things that happened right off the bat, all of which took me by surprise. Once I decided to go to Germany for the Dialogue, I began to tell people about my plans. When I told my immediate circle of family and friends, I was met with unexpected enthusiasm – which emboldened me to tell others as well. I ended up writing a letter to my entire email list, explaining the purpose of my trip and why it was important to me, and asking for people's support (both emotional and financial). The response was overwhelming.

Not only did many people generously donate money toward my effort, enough to pay for the entire trip, but virtually everyone responded with heart felt interest and encouragement.

Many people were impressed by the fact that, after 12 years of seeking, I was able to find this opportunity. Others were moved by my personal desire for healing and the organization's goal of transformation. Some were interested in the process of reconciliation. And some were prompted to share their own stories of trauma resulting from World War II, and other conflicts that they and their families have endured. The surprising part was how much interest was generated, and this was so unexpected and so validating.

The stories that people shared revealed that war of all kind, and WWII in particular, has caused wide spread suffering for everyone involved. I heard stories of families torn apart, of profound starvation, of lasting psychological damage, of violence beyond my own imagination. I realized that the "Holocaust" and WWII did not ONLY cause suffering to Jews, but that it is a story that so many people share. I also learned that saying that everyone suffered in WWII negates the significance of what happened to 6 million Jews...

The Trip

While I was scared to leave my family, I had surprisingly little trepidation about the details of the trip – which I knew almost nothing about -- and unbelievable ease in thinking about the long flights ahead of me (something that normally terrifies me).

However, I had instant suspicion about the flight crew, who all appeared to be German. Something about this, even though I knew it was a Lufthansa flight, startled me. Actually, it terrified me. Maybe something about their uniforms? I had the sense that they saw me and found me lacking; and that they (not so secretly) wished I weren't going to be on the flight. Logically, I know this is irrational, especially considering the extremely diverse ethnic representations of passengers. I still felt as though I stood out, obviously the one who didn't fit in. This provided a great opportunity to begin my reflection on intergenerational trauma.

My concern only grew as the flight attendants worked their way through the cabin speaking to everyone auf Deutsch. I had studied German throughout my schooling, and as a result, I can understand between 50% and 75% of spoken German. But actually speaking German is something else entirely. I couldn't even get my brain and tongue to cooperate for a simple, "danke!" let alone the more sophisticated phrase, "nein, danke!" The synapses were either not cooperating or had been replaced by newer functions in my brain.

There was a very approachable woman sitting next to me who seemed quite at ease speaking German. Probably because she was German. After spending the first two hours of the flight building up my courage, I asked her if she would help me write down a few key phrases. My German Phrasebook turned out to be completely useless – full of vocabulary and verb tenses, but nothing along the lines of practical phrases such as, "I would like to order..." or "excuse me for my ignorance," or "bear with my sloppy German." To my great relief, she set me up with "ja, gerne!" und "nien, danke!" and many other helpful phrases.

The conversation then drifted to where we were both coming from/going to. I started off very carefully: going to a conference, never been to Germany. She was more open: just coming home from a training on intergenerational trauma healing. Well then. I mean, how likely is it that

anyone else from among the 350 people on the plane was interested in intergenerational trauma healing? I told her why I was really coming to Germany, and that I had never before been able to set foot in Germany, and that I was coming to participate in a German/Jewish dialogue for the week. She wept and thanked me for coming. She then assured me that Germany truly and deeply welcomed me. And perhaps more amazingly, I believed her.

We spent the remainder of the flight talking about different psychological models, different healing modalities, the enneagram designations of most nations/cultures in the world, the nature of pain and process, the relationship of war and national identity, the construction of gender identity that results from war and other cultural artifacts...just a few of my favorite topics. Her name is Andrea and I appreciate her crossing my path to remind me about unexpected perfection, and that there more to life than meets the eye.

Andrea and I parted company in Frankfurt and, after navigating the most twisted and poorly marked maze of underground passageways known to humankind, I found my flight to Berlin.

Germany

As I walked out of the baggage claim, I found Martina (from One by One) awaiting me with a hand written sign, a beautiful yellow flower, and a welcoming smile. She greeted me as though I was a celebrity...providing the metaphoric red carpet I had once hoped to find upon my "return." What a beautiful welcome.

Martina drove me to the apartment where I would be hosted, off of Berlin Strasse. Hannah met us at the door and helped us maneuver into the pre-historic elevator that took us to the fourth floor. Somehow the apartment building smelled like my Grandmother. I don't know how else to explain it. Hannah explained that this had been a Jewish neighborhood – the Jews had lived here. I felt it in the walls – the comfort, the horror, the desperation, and the relatively recent (and tentative) renewal.

Hannah had lived in Boston for 30 years, and spoke perfect English. Her apartment was bright and welcoming, and my room had a balcony that overlooked the tree-lined street. Hannah oriented me to the U-bahn, helped me purchase some tickets, and pointed out some neighborhood conveniences: the Bakeri, the Turkish Grocery, and the Vietnamese Sushi Restaurant. Interestingly, my first conversations with "Germans" in "German" were with the Turkish grocer (starting with a "Merhaba") and the Vietnamese restaurant owners (ending with "Cam-On").

Even though the dialogue didn't officially start until Thursday evening, Hannah and another One by One volunteer had generously offered to take the group to the Jewish Museum Thursday afternoon. I knew nothing about the Jewish Museum, just as I knew nothing about Berlin, Germany, or anything other detail about this trip (other than that I was meant to be a part of it). It was a short subway ride into an older part of town, and an even shorter walk to the Museum. Hannah and I walked along the Avenue of the Poets, where short lines of poetry are engraved on plaques that sit in the roadway. Interspersed along the way were also "stumble stones," smaller brass plaques that remember Jewish businesses and residences that were destroyed during the War.

We arrived at the Museum to find around 10 of the One by One group members on the front steps. We introduced ourselves around and I found myself immediately gravitating towards one tall and exceptionally beautiful older woman who seemed imbued with a mix of cynicism and desperate hope that felt comfortably familiar. We both felt it was ironic that as we walked into the Museum we went through a metal detector, were given a badge to wear, had our possessions taken away at the mandatory bag check, and were then led to an exceptionally hot and stuffy courtyard where they explained that we couldn't have anything to drink (or eat) while in the museum. Maybe ironic isn't the right word. In any case, that's when I started to cry.



Our tour guide was clearly passionate about Jewish history, and exceptionally passionate about art and art history. He spoke openly about the history of anti-Semitism in the world, and gave current examples of it within contemporary European culture and within the enduring symbology of Christianity. One piece of interesting information is that the word "Holocaust" refers to a burnt offering, and has the connotation that it is in service to and accepted by God. As a result, Germany has rejected the word "Holocaust" and has embraced "Shoah" in its place. "Shoah" refers to an unspeakable tragedy, which is regarded as a more apropos description. It was fascinating...and upsetting.



The Museum is split into three axes: the axis of continuity, the axis of emigration, and the axis of the Holocaust. At the end of the axis of emigration is the Garden of Exile. This is a profound memorial to those who had to leave their home and start over in a strange new land – a common theme among Jews. The ground is canted at a strange angle, and pillars rise to the sky, with olive trees planted at the top of each pillar – symbolizing our ability to grow without the benefit of a deep root system. The overall affect of the canted environment is disorientating and nauseating, replicating the experience of exile for visitors – nothing

seems familiar, and once one settles into the new perspective, the cityscape beyond the garden wall and the flat ground of the museum appear uneven by comparison. Nothing is the same again.

Equally profound is the experience in the Holocaust Tower at the end of the axis of the Holocaust. A black door leads into an angular room that stretches up several stories. In the top corner of the tower is a small slit of light, and as visitors enter the room, one after another, everyone's eyes are drawn upward to the small shaft of light...a tiny ray of possibility in a gloomy dungeon. I sat in the corner and watched heads turn upward, like flowers desperate for the nourishing sun.



Both of these spaces, as well as the Memorial for Murdered Jews in Europe, inspired in me a whole new appreciation for the power of environmental design. While I know architecture is about more just

than function, these places changed my idea of place.

The permanent exhibit of the Museum tells the story of Jews in Germany, and provided context for all of the disparate pieces I know about my own family history. I found this to be extremely validating. As an example, when I would try to understand the story of my family, and my connection to the Holocaust, my Grandmother would say, “you don’t understand – we were Germans more than Jews, we even celebrated Christmas.” While I don’t know exactly what she was trying to convey by sharing this information with me, I always took it to mean that the story of the Holocaust wasn’t mine – we weren’t really Jews and therefore we weren’t really the ones who suffered. There was a whole floor of the Museum dedicated the cultural assimilation of the Jews in Germany, and an exhibit of the way that Jews celebrated Christmas, to show that Jews identified primarily as German -- making the persecution of Jews even more confusing and giving a false sense of security to many/most when the Holocaust started. So many Jews assumed they would be shielded from persecution because of their patriotism, secularism and wealth. As is now well known, this was not the case.

As I walked around the Museum I was amazed at the size and scope of the collections, and the size and scope of the people visiting the Museum. My own internalized anti-Semitism has/had me convinced that if there were value in the story of Jews in Europe, no one except Jews would be interested in hearing about it – and “they,” as evidenced by the history of my own family, would only be marginally interested. The Museum provided a techno-color contradiction to that thinking as I saw hordes of people: Germans, Asians, Africans, and people from around the world studying the collections with great interest. I say, “Wow.”

Start of The Dialogue

I found my way to the Dialogue on Thursday evening, which was held in the Mendelssohn-Remise – a beautiful and historic building housing artifacts, remembrances and concerts in honor of the Mendelssohn family legacy in Berlin. It is located in East Berlin, which is now a very fashionable business district.



The entire group was assembled: descendants of German Jews, Polish Jews, Dutch Jews, Nazi Party Members, German Soldiers, and German Communists/Resisters. The first evening was an opportunity to introduce ourselves briefly, meet the film crew (who were filming a documentary about the dialogue), and to hear the stories of the facilitators. As the telling of stories began, I became more and more excited about what was to come.

As might be imagined, there was a common theme among participant introductions: suffering. I think my excitement, and the excitement of others, was largely due this shared opportunity to name, address, grieve, and transform some of the suffering we carry. Many people spoke of it as

a burden on their backs, some talked about the black box that 2nd and 3rd generation survivors carry. Regardless of what part of the story they claimed, everyone was interested in having this conversation, and many were coming for the second or third time.

The film and sound crew were all young men. Most of them were German, and one was from England. They were very young, mostly in their early twenties, and all of them were there primarily for the job of filming, but they all expressed a surprising amount of sensitivity to the topic and gratitude toward the participants for sharing their stories. As the week progressed they were all moved to claim their own parts of the story of suffering – asking new questions of their German parents and grandparents, and feeling their own painful burdens from the (often untold) stories of their ancestors. Since I don't typically regard young men as being interested in suffering, or even particularly compassionate toward it, I was able to learn a lot from their sweetness.

I know that I've recently been reclassified away from my historic enneagram designation of a four (The Melancholic Romantic), but my four-nature (central or otherwise) was in its glory. I couldn't believe my luck in finding a group of people willing to laugh and cry and heal this story that has always felt so important to me. And, contrary to my fears that people would come to wallow in the stuck-ness of their stories, everyone in the dialogue was interested and willing to use the dialogue as a process for transformation and healing, despite the varied and unique ways in which we defined that for ourselves.

The vast majority of participants were therapists of one kind or another, and I'm pretty sure that everyone present had done a lot of therapy around their story before coming. As the stories emerged, this proved to be an important part of the group. While the purpose of this dialogue was specifically NOT therapeutic, the stories shared were so intense that it was helpful to have a common therapeutic language.

Site Seeing in Berlin



The format of the dialogue was to take a long lunch break each day, during which participants were invited to go on structured and semi-structured tours of Berlin. On the first day of the dialogue, a Berlin One by One member took us to the Memorial for Murdered Jews in Europe. This is an extremely controversial monument in Berlin, close to the Brandenburg Gate. It was built in a section of town that had been bombed out during the War, and there had been conflicting ideas about what to do with this central piece of historic real estate. The end result is a city block that is covered in cement blocks of all sizes – inviting the visitor to make their own meaning. From some angles it looks like a cemetery, from other angles a cityscape. Reminiscent of the Garden of Exile, one's perspective changes from every angle, which is both disorienting and profound.

Unlike the Jewish Museum, the Monument for Murdered Jews in Europe is open to the public without admission. This means that everyone has access to it, and it is often full of tour groups

and children playing, and teenagers standing on top of the stones, or jumping from stone to stone. While broad public access to the Memorial is central to its purpose, there is something upsetting about the crowds of tourists, and the use of the Memorial as a jungle gym. As I walked through the isles, a young blonde boy carrying a German flag jumped from stone to stone. I found the imagery to be haunting.

While the rest of the group went down to the exhibit space below the Memorial, I was too upset and undone to join them. Just thinking about going into a hole in the ground made me feel too claustrophobic; so, instead, I fell apart.

Sascha, the filmmaker, insisted that he and film crew accompany me back to the Dialogue space. He let me talk and talk, and offered me compassion and encouragement. He gently reminded me that this is what I came to Germany for. The whole point of the trip was to feel difficult feelings, and to address the challenges within me as well as those that remain in Germany.

The Dialogue Continues

Some dialogue participants are just beginning the process of researching and developing an understanding of their stories. Others have written books about their experiences, made films about their stories, and others have had books written about them. Several participants have even appeared on Oprah.

In looking around the group of white, middle aged, middle class participants, it was easy to see the commonalities in our circumstances. Most of the participants were in their 60's, but there were a couple of us in our 40's and one granddaughter of survivors who had just turned 30. We are all 2nd and 3rd generation survivors with ties to Germany. We are all well educated and avidly interested in intergenerational trauma healing. We all have the privilege of being able to travel to Berlin and take a week away from our other commitments. But our stories also revealed differences that were staggering.

Everyone's family struggled during the war. It was an ungodly hard time for all. But it seems like there was, and still is, a hierarchy of suffering that is difficult to grasp. Most of the Jewish families started off as middle to upper class members of society. And all but one of those families represented in the Dialogue lost everything in a moment. Many parents and grandparents were starved and tortured and raped and forced into slave labor for their survival.

Many of the Dialogue participants were born to parents who, miraculously, survived work camps, concentration camps, death camps, displaced persons camps, and poverty in their new lands. Most participants were born after their parents made their way, against all odds, to the USA, to England, to Hungary, to Australia, and to Latvia. These families started from scratch to learn new languages, new trades, and new strategies for life. Many families lived out the war in Germany and immigrated with families after the war. And many stayed in Germany to live in the shadow of their parents' involvement with the National Socialist Party.

Some families dealt with their losses by shielding their children from all possible harm. Other families dealt with their losses by perpetrating unspeakable harm against their own children. Multiple Dialogue participants were hospitalized due to the severe physical and sexual abuse they suffered in childhood.

Some families became fervently dedicated to furthering social justice. And some families told their stories to anyone who would listen. Others turned away from the suffering in the world to live quiet lives alone. And some families never told their stories again.

There has been a lot of research about what survivor families do. And our families did all of that.

And One by One exists to provide a place for all of us to tell our story and engage in a conversation of transformation.

Site Seeing

We took a walk through the Jewish Quarter and saw a beautiful village within the city, full of rich history. The first memorial we encountered was a public park with an enormous table and two chairs. The size of the furniture is just the right scale for the observer to be child sized by comparison. One of the chairs has fallen over, and lies on its side. It is simple, made of beautifully crafted metal to look like wood. And yet, the simplicity belies the significance of the imagery: that is how quickly it happened, and the upset chair is the only evidence that remained in its wake.

We came upon a footprint of a house that had had served as a way station for Jews being deported to concentration camps. I believe the estimate was that 55,000 Jews had passed through this house. A memorial of haunting figures remained in its wake, with stones and candles placed along its base in memory of those who passed through.

Behind this house stood a mass grave for the thousands who died on the final day of the war. Jews and Germans alike were buried in this grave, without any remaining markings or names.

Concentration Camps

I had mixed emotions about going to a concentration camp. On the one hand, I was physically and emotionally exhausted, and couldn't imagine enduring the intensity of being in such a diabolical place. On the other hand, I was in Germany and I had the support of the group. One of the Dialogue participant's grandmother had spent several months in the Ravensbruck concentration camp, and one of the Berlin One By One members had grown up on the other side of the small lake where the camp is located. The One by One Member arranged a trip to Ravensbruck, and three of the Dialogue members travelled approximately two hours to spend the afternoon at the camp.



Ravensbruck was a camp for women, and held women from over 25 countries. Jews, Gypsies and political dissidents populated the camp, and there were many work projects and factories associated with the camp. Of the 130,000 women who came to the camp, only 40,000 survived.

As we were making our plans to go, I called my husband to tell him. He had just gotten our son back to sleep after a particularly bad night terror. Elijah had dreamt that he was being held prisoner. The literature on intergenerational trauma suggests that trauma continues for seven generations, unless measures are taken to heal. I feel that Elijah's dream illustrated the

interconnection of generations – that he was feeling my own trepidation at the task I was undertaking. Across continents, we shared the terror caused by the ultimate disempowerment that was experienced in these concentration camps.

We arrived in the town of Furstenberg, and began our walk to the camp. As we turned off the main road in Furstenberg, the road changed from asphalt to beautifully laid stone. Our guide explained that the prisoners had built this road during their internment. Once learning that, each step hurt.



We arrived at the camp and were immediately struck by the incongruence. The well kept grounds, and the idyllic setting on the lake belie the camp's purpose. The wind rushed through the poplar trees, creating a calming sound to match the setting.

The camp's prison, with two stories of solitary confinement cells, had been dedicated to a permanent exhibit. Each country that was represented by prisoners had use of a single cell to display something of significance. While many countries used the space for abstract artistic expression, many countries included photos and other documentation of the women who were imprisoned in Ravensbruck. They looked dedicated and passionate, and highly intelligent. They look like women I would want to know, and whom I would most likely admire for their dedication to shared ideals. And there were so many of them: room after room of these daughters, sisters, cousins, mothers, and grandmothers.

When we left the camp, our friend from Furstenberg informed us that he was bringing us home with him for a good German meal. After arriving at his home, we fell upon the food, exhausted from an emotional day and desperate for the comfort of a good meal. To know we were free to eat and breathe and do just about anything we might please was a dizzying and welcome sensation.

Travelling home late that night we found ourselves on the train with a group of drunk young women. They were drinking and singing and carrying on, and were having a great deal of fun. They launched a rousing rendition of, "Neun und Neunzig Luft Ballons," a popular song from my high school days, which seemed so strange to encounter on this strangest of days.

After I returned to my apartment, a neighbor began to blast some classic Queen recordings, quite loudly, and until about 2am. I was struck by the intricately complex and frequently contradictory web of human experience.

Saying Goodbye

On my last day in Berlin, I ran around the city looking for souvenirs for my family. I was too tired to do the research I had planned for the day and tried instead to just relax and take in Berlin, a glorious city to be sure.

Before I left for Germany, my Mother told me that the one thing I had to do in Berlin was go to the Ka De We, a historic department store. She had fond memories of the size and scope and quality of it, and particularly remembered a whole floor of floor-to-ceiling feather beds.

I told a friend that I planned to go and she discouraged me. She said there wasn't anything special about it anymore, and encouraged me to go to the Gallerie Lafeyette instead. I went to Gallerie Lafeyette instead, and found a store that looked more or less exactly like Bloomingdales, except that there was nothing at all within my price range. It was extremely depressing, and I spent the afternoon lamenting my inability to find something of meaning for my Mother.



I met a group of friends from the Dialogue in the early evening. One friend mentioned the Ka De We, and I told her about my Mom's memory. She jumped out of her seat and said we had 45 minutes before it closed, and we were going to honor my Mother! We took a cab across town and ran through the Ka De We – a ridiculous journey, but also a very important one. We found my Mother a souvenir. It felt like such an essential pilgrimage in the overall process of connecting with my ancestors' stories, and I almost missed it.

Reflections and Questions

One of the big issues that emerged during the course of the Dialogue was the importance of telling these stories. Specifically, many people brought up the importance of telling the stories to our children and grandchildren so that they know what is in their DNA and why. Those Dialogue participants who never learned their parents' and grandparents' stories were deeply troubled by the stories they felt, but didn't know.

While this telling of story seems perfectly reasonable to me, I suddenly realized that this meant I would have to tell my family's stories to MY children! This overwhelmed me because of the importance of the task, and the pain of the task. One Dialogue participant told about bringing his seven-year old son to Auschwitz and explaining EVERYTHING to him. I tried to imagine how I could explain the unexplainable tragedies of the Shoah to my children – and I tried to imagine how they would/could metabolize those images and unimagined horrors. It just destroyed me.

I think my fellow Dialogue participant went overboard (and he realizes that too, now). But I think other families, even my own, have been too cautious about explaining the horrors of our history – with the best of intent. I was ten before I started to piece together the fragments of our story, and though I think ten might be a more appropriate age to begin, it is still an unbelievably daunting and important task to take on.

Another remaining question was what to do about the increase in Neo-Nazism in Germany, and the presence of hate throughout the world. The Shoah was horrific, but it continues in other forms even today.

Conclusions

I don't expect this travelogue to be complete, and I do expect that I will continue to think and reflect about these issues for the rest of my life. These stories are cryptic keys to understanding humanity, in all of its perfection and imperfection, and are therefore essential pieces to the puzzle of healing and transformation. And they are valuable gifts for those who come after us.

I anticipate further conversation and ongoing dialogue with the Dialogue participants, for in our time together we only had time to hallmark the topics that we hope to consider further. I anticipate bringing some of these stories and experiences to current and future students, clients and communities. And I expect that this experience will change my life – although I can't articulate how, or guess what concrete shifts might result. I do know that it was an important step in my personal process of healing, and a vital piece of my professional development. We'll see what comes next.



Thank you all for your interest and support!

Love,
Amanda.