

Kissing and Biting: On Controversy

Raphael Magarik

On Tuesday morning of my Germany Close Up trip, we visited the Sachsenhausen concentration camp. That evening, while walking to the Oranienburger Straße synagogue for dinner and debriefing, I encountered a protest. Across the street from the synagogue, twenty or thirty German Jews shuffled about in the cold and dark air of a November Berlin evening. They held signs: “*v’ahavta l’reiakha kamokha*,” (“love your neighbor as yourself”), “immigrants welcome.”

A friend who speaks German explained that they were protesting the Central Council of Jews in Germany. Its president, Josef Schuster, had recently been interviewed in *Die Welt* about the wave of refugees that had reached Germany that summer. While he had expressed sympathy with asylum-seekers and warned against right-wing reaction, he was worried that “with people of Arab origins, antisemitism in Germany could increase.” The protestors felt such worries provided an alibi for xenophobes and wanted to clarify that they disagreed. The Israeli ex-pat writer Shaked Shapir explained in *Spitz*, a Berlin-based Hebrew-language magazine, that the first refugees he knew were his grandfather and grandmothers, who had fled Germany in 1930s; he felt Schuster was adopting a far-right position and “instrumentalizing antisemitism.”

Although I agree with Shaked and the protestors, I found the gathering moving for reasons that transcended its particular politics. Leaving Sachsenhausen that morning, I had felt defiled by the horrendous Soviet monument and Nazi machine-gun tower on either side of the yard, the cramped wooden bunks crowded once with prisoners and now with sad photographs, the blank concrete outside the crematorium. In Jewish tradition, you wash your hands upon exiting a graveyard; there is no tradition for what one does when leaving a concentration camp, but washing my hands didn’t help. I only felt cleansed when I saw Jews in the streets of Berlin, yelling that other Jews were dishonoring the memory of the Shoah.

There is a vitality in angry, moral dispute. The protest I witnessed showed that the Berlin Jewish community is large enough to be fractious and integrated enough to litigate its internal debates in the German public sphere. Further, Berlin Jews were taking their history into their own hands. Our gentle, erudite pony-tailed guide at Sachsenhausen was the grandchild of a camp guard. While I found his familial

repentance moving, having your people's shame narrated to you by their oppressors' descendent is not particularly empowering. By contrast, Schuster and Shaked were *Jews* interpreting Jewish trauma. And they were doing it in the most Jewish of ways – through vociferous disagreement. “Any conflict that is for the sake of heaven will endure,” an ancient Jewish ethical text says, teaching us, counter-intuitively, to savor the arguments that won't end, to let our disputes ferment for generations.

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I remember my week in Germany through moments of conflict or disagreement. This is surprising for two reasons. First, in America, the Holocaust is often that about which one does not disagree. As the sociologist Jeffrey Alexander argued in an article called “On the Social Construction of Moral Universals,” the Holocaust has come to signify absolute, universal evil in American society. It is a grim starting-point from which post-war Americans measured their efforts to “reconstruct a new moral order”: the Marshall Plan and the rebuilding of Europe; Cold War battles (supposedly) against totalitarianism; eventually and sadly, subsequent genocides. Though Alexander was writing of American culture and politics broadly, his argument is doubly true of American Jews. The Holocaust is often the fixed point of trauma from which we analyze the state of Israel, assimilation, and antisemitism. The scandals that engulfed Hannah Arendt when she suggested that the complicity of Jewish collaborators played a crucial role in Nazi violence or Primo Levi when he asserted that many of those who survived the camps did so through calculated brutality were not primarily about whether their claims were right or wrong. Rather, the controversy was about controversy itself, which threatened post-war America's (and particularly American Jewry's) anchoring story.

Second, disagreement is difficult to stage; it is hard to create programs that showcase discomfort. When Germany Close Up organized an impromptu panel of NGO-leaders working with refugees, we learned a great deal about practical relief efforts and heard both praise and criticism of the German government. That said, the panelists more or less agreed, and they respectfully nodded along to their colleagues' presentations. By contrast, when Richard, one of our German trip-leaders, seized a lucky moment in Leipzig, he managed to interrupt our prim, proper tour-guide's account of several centuries of high culture. “What's that building over there?” he asked. She told us that it had been repurposed for refugees, and then, as we looked up at the staring faces on the terraces with new attention, she told us her opinion of them: they were criminals, good-for-nothings, and the government should send them back. Without

Richard's quick thinking, that moment would have been lost on the way to Bach's church. But in it, Germany came alive as a country containing not only brilliant, creative, progressive activists but also frightened, right-wing citizens.

I think the great glory of Germany Close Up is that we heard from that middle-aged, conservative woman. Of course, German courage in reckoning with its *past* impresses Americans. After walking through the "Topography of Terror" and the Berlin Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe, many members of our group asked: Why doesn't the United States have a museum dedicated to documenting its history of slavery? And I found it further moving, after the smooth, abstract stones of the memorial, to crowd together into a Dunkin' Donuts and debate loudly its pros and cons, as well as those of the video-art in The Memorial to the Homosexuals Persecuted under the National Socialist Regime (the consensus was: too white and too sexualized). But in disrupting our cultured Leipzig walking tour, Richard chose to highlight not a shameful past or the paradoxes of memorialization, but an embarrassing present-day reality. As the protest outside the Oranienburger Straße synagogue renewed my faith that "*am yisrael chai*" (the Jewish people lives), so, too, that unscripted moment in Leipzig brought home to me German history and politics not as a solemn, mournful tragedy but as a living, ongoing drama.

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The vitality of dispute is different from the charming liveliness of a rebuilt city. Of course, Berlin has that charm as well. Sitting in a café across from our hotel drinking beers and reading Walter Benjamin, as we did late one night, I could have imagined myself back in Weimar-era Berlin, Benjamin or Gerhard Scholem themselves ambling over with a witticism or gnomic remark. The Berlin synagogues are stuffed full of academics on fellowships, the museums have their Old Masters, the bakeries their light, creamy *quarkkuchen*. The first few mornings, I ran, shivering along the bleak Spree, thinking dark thoughts about this haunted city, and didn't feel alive until I returned to the hotel's enormous urns of blistering, dark coffee. But as I ran further, I got to public gardens, small, quaint alleys lined with irregular houses, and even rowboats beached for the winter. After a week, the vague picture I had harbored of Berlin as a gloomy graveyard needed to be completely scrapped.

But I don't think Jews should come to Berlin for the Old Masters, the beer, or the doughnuts. We should come for the controversy. Take the monument to the non-Jewish women of the Rosenstraße protest, who

protested to have their Jewish husbands freed from Nazi slave labor or deportation. As Dr. Dagmar Pruin explained, the Rosenstraße women are easily forgotten because they make *everyone* uncomfortable. Because the women indeed prevailed, their protest suggests that, even in 1943, civil disobedience could have saved many lives – a message Germans do not always like hearing. But neither do these gentile-Jewish intermarriages easily fit the pieties of Jewish tourists or institutions. Moreover, the angular, social-realist monument, which was designed by an East German sculptor in the late 1980s, but only erected in 1995, pays obeisance to an ideology that was instantly anachronistic. A Communist tribute to intermarried women’s successful resistance provides a history inconvenient on many levels.

Yet none of us – Germans, Americans, or Jews – need founding myths these days. Previous generations, perhaps, did. On these simpler stories, Germany built a thriving liberal democracy, the economic engine and moral leader of Europe; America justified its own international ascendancy; and Jews built both a state and a new, American home in the diaspora. But now things are mixed up. In America, a populist, far-right demagogue is targeting Muslims, and the German Chancellor is spearheading the defense of a liberal Europe against those same forces. Just yesterday, a Jewish friend whose grandparents fled Hitler in the thirties went to the San Francisco German embassy to receive German citizenship. 2017, he told me, has seen more American Jews reclaiming German citizenship than any previous year, for obvious reasons. The week I was in Berlin, immigration figures for French Jewry were released, and it was revealed that more than 1% had left for Israel in one year alone. Meanwhile, literally uncountable numbers of Israelis have left their homes for Berlin, now perhaps the world-capital of Israeli culture. We are living in a mixed-up generation. In encountering Germany and our Jewish past, we need more controversy, more dissonance, more provocation.

Near the Berlin Wall memorial is the Chapel of Reconciliation, whose outside wall is composed of innumerable wooden crosses. The striking architecture of the church assimilates the story of East and West Berlin reconciling to a far older Christian story, one in which God and man reconcile. Not far from the Chapel is a reconciliation sculpture, in which two kneeling bronze figures have fallen on each other’s necks; whatever the intentions of Josefina de Vasconcellos, who created it, the sculpture suggests to me a somewhat different, perhaps more Jewish, story about how reconciliation and reunion can occur.

When I saw the bronze figures in November 2015, I immediately thought of a verse in that week’s Torah portion. When Jacob meets Esau after decades of enmity, things go surprisingly well: “And Esau ran to

meet him, and embraced him, and fell on his neck, and kissed him; and they wept” (Gen. 33:4). In the canonical text, the Hebrew word for “kissed him” (וַיִּשָׁקוּ) is anomalously adorned with several dots. A *midrash* (fanciful rabbinic interpretation) suggests that these dots indicate that as they were embracing, Esau tried to bite Jacob’s neck. I had always taken that *midrash* as a somewhat obnoxious rabbinic attempt to mute a biblical voice of peace and reconciliation and reassert the flatter, rabbinic narrative about Esau’s ill intents.

But looking at this sculpture, in which the figures seem simultaneously to be embracing and wrestling, I started thinking that maybe the point of the *midrash* is that struggle is oddly integral to reconciliation, that authentically repairing a broken relationship, whether between individuals or political collectives, actually requires a playful, contained, even aestheticized but nonetheless real and potentially painful enactment of the violence that has been done and has been fantasized about. Maybe to be substantial and meaningful, kissing must also involve a little bit of biting. It is that more contentious, difficult encounter that I enjoyed most during my week in Berlin and that I think our generation most vitally needs.

thinking about witness in three acts

i. the dog-walkers

The town of Oranienburg lies just 35 kilometers north of Berlin. It has a population of roughly 43,000 people. It is home to a lovely waterfront, a Farmers' Market, a popular nearby lake district and a Wildlife and Dinosaur Park. This is all mentioned on the sparse English tourism website for Oranienburg, along with its other core visitor draw, a memorial and museum at the site of the former Sachsenhausen concentration camp.

Wikipedia says that underneath the pavement of Oranienburg, there are as many as 300 pieces of unexploded ordnance. These pieces are still being excavated in a process that has led to evacuations of thousands of people in some cases. Even now, in the Third Generation, where these horrific years are slipping away from living memory, there are still scars that stay with this town, that stay with so many communities across Europe, if not the world.

Our guide at Sachsenhausen was Laura, a tall, redhead history student from Berlin who ended her sentences with an up-ticked "yeah?" She tells us that before the camp was built, there was an early concentration camp in the town of Oranienburg itself, that housed primarily prisoners of war and dissidents. The residents of Oranienburg could walk up to the prison and see what was happening, and inmates were often marched through the town.

What did it feel like, I wondered, that shared space between the townsfolk and the prisoners? Did the neighbors come home from work at night confident in the law of their land to do the right thing? Or were they disturbed at bearing witness to bondage and brutality? When the first prison camp was shut down and absorbed into Sachsenhausen, on the wooded outskirts, was there a sick bit of relief that they no longer had to view this oppression up close? Out of sight, out of mind?

She led us on the path up to the camp, which is tranquil and woodsy and green. People walk their dogs or go for morning runs near it. It feels a little like a too-literal example of the banality of evil, not that the dog walkers and joggers are evil, I mean, but to be so conditioned to the site of such horror that you can make it part of your morning walk. I wonder what it feels like to bear witness like that every day. Germany, and Berlin specifically, is saturated with memorial. Everywhere is some marker that urges the Third Generation to remember, to tell the story, to hold its country accountable to prevent future disasters of humanity.

In the barracks, we notice the ceilings are flecked with scorch marks and peeling, remnants of a 1992 fire started by a small band of neo-Nazis from Oranienburg. There was a lot of debate, Laura says, over whether to restore the barracks to their original state or to leave the damage from the fire. They decided to leave the barracks as-is, to show evidence of what had been done, of the way violence can be done in the name of denial and absolution, of the way violence can be done without a single person coming to physical harm.

The staff had said everyone responds to the intensity of the day and its subject matter differently. As we walked back from what was left of the crematoria, shaken from the phantom images of smoke rising, the imagined metronome of 10,000 bullets entering, with grim efficiency, the necks of Soviet prisoners of war, rain spitting on the gravel path, I let go and asked Laura if she was doing okay. I said I couldn't imagine giving these tours, recounting these horrors, multiple times a day. She said yes, that it was hard, that she was okay, that she is not here every day, that she is studying 20th century history so this is part of her focus in school, that she can keep everything in that academic framework. I felt like my chest was going to split into fragments just asking her that question and maybe this makes me a selfish person but part of me wanted her to cry too, for some kind of shared acknowledgment of the burden of bearing witness.

Earlier that week, at the Jewish Museum in Berlin, we had watched an interview from an interpreter at the Auschwitz Trials. She spent hours a day, week in and week out, for ten years, translating stories from the survivors. She wept before bed every night. She lived the rest of her life with dozens and dozens of ghosts inside her. We don't talk enough about the ways in which witnessing someone else's trauma can be a form of experiencing it. No amount of witnessing and listening can bring back millions of people, but her work helped bring about at least some justice and accountability at these trials. Germany reminded us that bearing witness is more than a historic or spiritual or even moral necessity, but one that could have immediate consequences in the pursuit of justice.

ii. rosenstrasse

On one of our first days in Berlin, we were taken on a tour of Jewish Mitte. I had already grown to love the City Centre, taking in the cafés and colorful street art, the Jewish girls' school turned into a chic bar and art galleries. In the awe of my new surroundings, I missed the pockmarks in the buildings left by bullets, the *Stolpersteine* under my feet. Dr. Dagmar Pruin from ASF, advised us to look at the details around us and uncover their histories.

Thinking about it now, turning the phrase she used, "don't trust the green grass," over and over in my head, I think not of Berlin but my own backyard. There is a nice public park near my parents' house in the Chicago suburbs, with baseball diamonds and a pool and neighborhood concerts in the summertime. The park was built after a developer had proposed building a series of affordable homes for Black families and the village board, spurred by the outcry of residents, blocked the project under the pretense of a referendum to build more parks. Deerfield was called "The Little Rock of the North." I wonder if the kids in our local schools learn about this history at all, how much of it happened so close. I don't think we talk about it much. It was a footnote in our history class, if discussed at all. Even at home, the green grass tells a different story now.

On that same walking tour, we visited a statue commemorating the Rosenstrasse demonstrations, where a group of non-Jewish women publicly rallied to demand the release of their imprisoned Jewish husbands. They were successful, and it remains one of the strongest and most resonant public displays of resilience against the Nazi regime. But then

why, our guide asked, if this had been such an inspiring act of resistance, had it flown under the radar for so long, save for a 2003 film?

The suggestion from the group that stuck with me was that for all the people who genuinely believed they had no choice but to do nothing, who believed they had to follow orders and turn away from the suffering of their friends and neighbors, it was too difficult to see examples of people just like them standing in solidarity. Dr. Pruin said, with an honesty that I appreciated, she hoped that if, God forbid, the situation ever arose, she would do the right thing, but could not say for sure if she would. She's a mother. She has people to protect. And this was coming from a woman of faith, whose work was rooted in the tradition of the Confessing Church, the church of Resistance, a voice of moral clarity in the clangor of fascism, from someone who had dedicated their life to reconciliation and understanding.

That's always the question though, isn't it? "What would you have done?" "What would I have done?" There is never a clean, uncomplicated answer, even when we feel there should be.

I wrote many of the words here in 2015, within weeks of returning from Germany. Revisiting them in 2017 feels eerie and timely. The world is demanding of us answers to the question, "What would you have done?" In the wake of the death of Michael Brown, a Black teenager, at the hands of a white police officer in Ferguson, Missouri in 2014, activists took to Twitter to remind everyone that "if they wanted to know for sure what they would have done during the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, they would do exactly whatever they are doing right now." It is 2017 now and we are given the same reminders, but louder, more frequently and more urgently.

Every time I sit down to finish this essay, it is punctuated by some new national or international wound that speaks to that question. Two weeks ago, two men in Portland, Oregon, Taliesin Namkai-Meche and Ricky John Best, were murdered by a white supremacist on a commuter train. The men, along with Micah Fletcher, who was injured, were attacked while defending two young Muslim women from the perpetrator. They made the choice to be more than witnesses, even though it ended in devastating consequences. We ponder their legacies now, and compare them to acts of resistance from generations before us, and keep asking ourselves, "What would you have done?"

The surviving defender, Micah Fletcher, appealed to the public to divert its fundraising efforts from the families of the deceased to the two young women who were being harassed. When a misguided individual crossed out "Black and Brown Lives Matter" on an impromptu chalk memorial in Portland and replaced it with "All Lives Matter, We All Bleed Red," Fletcher took to social media to reinforce the importance of centering the needs and voices of people of color and offered to restore the original message himself. Even after risking his life, he is still answering the question, loud and clear.

iii. deutschland kaputt hurrai

There are so many different ways to tell a story. In Germany, there's a story just about everywhere, from each vivid mural square at the East Side Gallery to the *kindertransport* exhibit in the train station.

While there, I was captivated by the choices of words people used, when talking about the Shoah or talking about history at large. I was surprised to learn that Germans don't really use the term *Kristallnacht*, which is translated in English as 'night of the broken glass' and drums up images of burning synagogues and smashed windows. But in German, *Kristallnacht* is still 'crystal night,' still the euphemistic language of the Nazis. The name was used to soften the blow. There, the night of the broken glass is referred to as the 'November pogrom,' an attempt to convey in the simplest terms the horror of that night, exactly. The name of our host organization is deliberate in its word choice. The word "sühnezeichen" is translated into English as "reconciliation," but the closer, more literal translation is "act of atonement."

We attended a panel marking the 70th anniversary of V-E Day (or 'the 8th of May'/'9th of May' as it's known elsewhere) and heard our presenters discuss the language Germany and the former Soviet Union used to describe the day. In Germany, it took a while, but one of the most common narratives is that the 8th of May was a 'Day of Liberation' from fascism.

On the evening of V-E Day, we went to a party at a gay nightclub in Neukölln, where even at 2 a.m., the line snaked out the door. The marquee out front marked the date with the ironic message "DEUTSCHLAND KAPUTT HURRAI."

The stories are told through artwork and memorial too, everywhere, even at your feet. Most resonant perhaps are the '*stolpersteine*,' or 'stumbling stones,' all over the country, placed outside the residences and workplaces of Jews who lived and worked there and were driven out during the Shoah. The work is meant to give them at least a piece of their history back. Even if the details are minimal—names, dates, when they lived here and where they met their fate—there is an acknowledgment of a life, an effort to tell a larger story.

In recalling all this, I've thought a lot about my own country's relationships with word choice and memorial. I live in a country where having your wedding on a plantation where people once owned other people is considered elegant and chic in some parts, where oil pipeline construction teams plow through burial sites of its indigenous peoples, where we dehumanize people by turning "illegal" into a noun. We could benefit from a serious approach to witness and accountability, and we are so late to it.

There's an ongoing debate in the Southern United States about whether or not to keep Confederate monuments from the Civil War standing. One argument in favor of removal of the monuments referenced Germany's approach to memorializing the Second World War. One of the key pro-Confederate monument arguments has to do with "educating future generations," and the rebuttal was that Germany uses monuments and statues as teaching tools and memorials, but they're not putting up heroic or romantic statues of SS operatives. That there are ways to bear witness to history, and to now, and tell our stories that allow us to face ourselves and accept responsibility, without spinning it. I don't know what those

teaching-tool monuments look like. I just know it starts with bearing witness to those on the margins, those most impacted. It starts with listening to people's stories.

The Car, The Caterer, and The Curious: Encountering Germany

Arezu Hashemi

Baba.

To him, Germany was the diesel-powered Mercedes Benz 180D driving down Sanandaj's busy Cyrus Street. Germany was the 1955 BMW he worked on with his father. Germany was the 1966 Volkswagen--or "*Floks vahgen*" as he pronounced it in his thick Kurdish accent--Double Cab he drove through Israel.

My father, Koroush, inherited his passion for cars from his own father, Fatola, who owned a mechanic shop in Iranian Kurdistan. My father dropped out of school at eleven years old, preferring to learn from radiators, wheel bearings, and brake pads rather than textbooks and teachers. As we sit in our Los Angeles kitchen reminiscing about his childhood, my father recalls special detail to German cars.

"My father would always tell me that Mercedes is the best car," he explains. "He had two Benzes, a commune 10-wheel truck and a taxi."

It was through cars, through father-son bonding, through educating himself in the craft that would become his lifelong career, that my father first encountered Germany.

Hearing my dad explain the origins of his love for German cars put a lot of things in perspective for me. It explained why as much as I expressed to him how badly I wanted a Jeep Wrangler as my first car, my dad gifted me with a 1982 Mercedes Benz convertible instead. It explained to me why my dad was inexplicably heartbroken when the strong Santa Ana winds knocked over a tree in our front yard, crushing the 1974 VW Beetle he restored.

When Fatola, died, my father inherited his shop. My father became the sole provider for his widowed mother and his six siblings. Breathing life into his dad's memory, my father utilized his passion and his mechanical skill to continue working on cars, especially Mercedes Benz. After he moved to Tehran and married my mother, Koroush opened another mechanic shop. He recalls his business relationship with the Tehran branch of the SKF Factory, a factory that made wheel bearings my dad purchased while working on German cars.

He tells me about a business trip he once took to Isfahan. My father found himself sitting next to a German man. As they began small talk, this man revealed that he worked for a factory that makes all different kinds of wheel bearings--for planes, cars, even bulldozers. The factory was called SKF. With a huge smile, as if he just experiencing that coincidence for the first time, my father recalls explaining to his new friend how much he loved Benz, and how he'd always buy parts from SKF.

"He told me that if I loved Benz so much I certainly had to go visit the Mercedes Benz factory in Germany. There, I'd be able to see the entire process of making a Benz from start to finish. After that plane ride, it became my biggest dream to visit Germany to see the Benz factory."

My father explains that growing up, he didn't like German people. He learned about Germany's role in World War II, about Hitler's attempts of eradicating the Jewish people and taking over Europe. As he grew older, my father explains how his father, Fatola, helped him change perspective.

“My father explained to me that one bad person, doesn't define an entire country. He'd urge me to look at the resilience of the German people, how quickly they had rebuilt and revived their country. How they've managed to rebuild relationships with different countries of the world and how they've reestablished themselves as an international influence”.

When my dad's relatives, friends, or customers came back from visiting Germany, no one ever forgot to bring him a car-themed present from their travels. My father's desires to visit Germany grew stronger but with a growing family to support, the dream of visiting the Benz factory was put on the backburner. In 1979 the Shah left Iran, Khomeini came into power, and the new political climate made it even harder for Koroush to take time off for himself and fulfill his adolescent dream. My parents soon left Iran in hopes of creating an easier life for their children.

On January 1st, 1985 my parents landed in the United States. As he moved to a new country, learned new customs and a new language, there was one thing my dad could not let go of: his love for cars.

My father works on cars every single day. At 67, an age where most American men retire, my father is still replacing parts, painting bumpers, and giving oil changes. As my father works on these machines, putting broken pieces back together, replacing faulty parts with new ones, and ensuring that everything is working as intended, Germany has been doing the same with their country. I believe that my father subconsciously finds inspiration in Germany and the extreme resilience of the German people, fusing his love of German cars with his love of his work and the memory of his father.

Mom.

To her, Germany was the young man working as a chef for Tehran University. When my mother, Edna, was studying in the dental hygiene department at Tehran University, she attended an end of the year party thrown for her class. She recalls arriving to the party with a few of her friends. A young German man on the catering staff immediately had eyes for my mother. He followed her around the party, intrigued by her looks and attracted to her laugh.

“At some point during the party, he came out of the kitchen and was wandering around. He saw me and he immediately liked me,” my mother recalls with a girlish giggle. “He kept following me around, asking my name, telling me he had a stable job with a stable salary.”

My mother spoke a bit of English, as did her suitor, making it easy for the two of them to communicate. He knew she was educated and he found that attractive. My mother tells me how over and over he asked her out and over and over she rejected him.

“I kept telling him how I couldn’t go out with him. I’d tell him ‘You’re German and I’m Jewish, how could we go out?’”

Unfortunately, my mother grew up believing the common misconception that all Germans hated Jews. Even though she was college educated, my mother still didn’t realize that hate wasn’t genetically inherited.

“I kept rejecting the chef and my friends kept teasing me, but I couldn’t get past the fundamental idea that he was German and I was Jewish.”

Meeting the chef at age nineteen was the first time my mother met a German. She had only encountered Germany—or some semblance of it—once before, at the age of seven.

In 1961 my mother and her family went to Israel. The adults, she recalls, were only interested in one topic of conversation.

“Through listening to the adults, the other kids and I figured out that there was some sort of trial going on for a man named Eichmann. I don’t know if my parents knew about the Holocaust,” she recalls. “If they did, they never spoke about it with us. They’d talk about Iran and Khomeini, they’d tell us to watch what we said in public and to censor our opinions. But I’d never heard the name Hitler before. Until I went to Israel.”

Over the years, my mother has told me all about her travels to Israel. I’ve heard stories of unpaved roads, picking berries from the trees with her cousins, hearing Hebrew for the first time outside of a synagogue. This was the first time I heard my mother mention that her very first trip to Israel coincided with the 1961 trial of Nazi SS lieutenant colonel, Adolf Eichmann. This was the only other time my mother had encountered Germany.

“My parents went.”

“Wait, what?!” I exclaimed. I had to make sure I had heard her correctly. “Are you saying that Maman Molouk and Baba Moussa went to Eichmann’s trial?”

“Yes, my parents went. You were allowed to go.”

My mother recalls watching the trial on television.

“We didn’t understand what they were asking him or what he was saying. We didn’t even realize exactly what they were charging him for. It was years later that we realized what he had done.”

My mother’s encounters with Germany were never direct. Never explicit. To her, Germany was the small man in the bulletproof box. It was the quiet conversations of adults discussing politics. It was the young caterer she rejected at the party.

Me.

To me, Germany was always known.

Growing up, Germany always equaled the Holocaust. Although I know my first notions of Germany had to be through the lens of studying World War II, I can't distinctly remember the first time I encountered the Holocaust. I've just always known. Things like learning how to walk or learning your own name—these are things you learned so young that by the time you started to develop a memory, they were things you already knew how to do.

For me—and for most Jewish kids in America—the Holocaust is an integral part of development. You encounter it immediately and loudly. You learn every single detail of every atrocity. You're taught it so often and so hard that you become completely numb to it.

I had only known the Germany I'd read in textbooks or the Germany I inherited from my mother: discreet, hateful, and irrelevant to my life.

As I began my college career, I chose to focus my studies on History. Pursuing this course of study allowed me to expose myself to the histories of many time periods and regions. As I learned more about the histories of the world, I could put into context the story of Germany within the greater story of humankind. Germany became less and less a backdrop for the atrocities I'd learned about. It became an idea.

I started to see more of what my father's Germany. I learned about the efforts to move forward as a nation, the complete physical and political transformation of the state, the incredible post-war progress. It was as if I was learning about an entirely new country. One that I had never heard of.

I'd spent my entire life pigeon-holing Germany into a six-year period. I never let myself explore the questions of what happened after the war was over. What happened to the German government post-war? What about all the German Jews that survived? How did the German people rebuild their country like my father told me? How did the rest of the world pursue justice in the Holocaust's aftermath? What are the people of Germany like now? What was Jewish life like before the war?

Just as all these questions entered my life, I encountered Germany Close Up. This was the opportunity I never realized I was looking for.

Germany Close Up gave me something different than my mother's Germany or my father's Germany. It gave me my Germany.

I was experiencing Germany for myself. Encountering it—*really* encountering it—for the very first time. We visited important Jewish centers around Berlin. We learned about Germany's bustling, thriving pre-war Jewish community. We prayed with German Jews in one of Berlin's most important synagogues. We learned about Germany's vision for its future. We met with different German non-profits concerned with battling anti-Semitism and Islamophobia. We learned about how Germany educates its youth on the Holocaust. How the Holocaust is a point of deep shame for the nation but also a reminder of the resilience of humankind, recognizing that the future can be shaped not by levels of such barbarism but by cooperation and community.

On our last day in Berlin, our group visited a mosque in Kreuzberg. In a Turkish mosque in the middle of Germany, next to my Palestinian tour guide, a Persian-Jewish, American-born woman from California—I sat. I sat next to peers and reflected on the journey that brought me to that moment. I thought of my mother and the chef. I thought of my grandmother at the Eichmann trial. I thought of my father restoring cars with my grandfather. I was the first of my family to truly encounter Germany—not physically, or ideologically—but spiritually. I connected with its people, history, and culture. I connected with myself. I opened myself up to its future, acknowledging its history but choosing to create my own notions of the country.

In that mosque, Germany was no longer a story. Germany was part of my story.