

Cynthia and I are home from the last leg of our trip, a visit to four Holocaust-related sites in Germany.



Cora Berliner Strasse

The first stop had a remarkable personal connection. The Holocaust Memorial in Berlin is bounded on one side by Cora Berliner Strasse. Cora Berliner was the great aunt of Barbara Tobin, my colleague when we started Remember Us. Her namesake, Barbara's daughter Cora, was one of the first children to participate in Remember Us and now, a college student, maintains our data records.



Berlin Memorial

The Memorial fills a full city block and beneath it is an exceptional Holocaust museum that conveys in one space both historical information and an intimate feeling for the human cost.

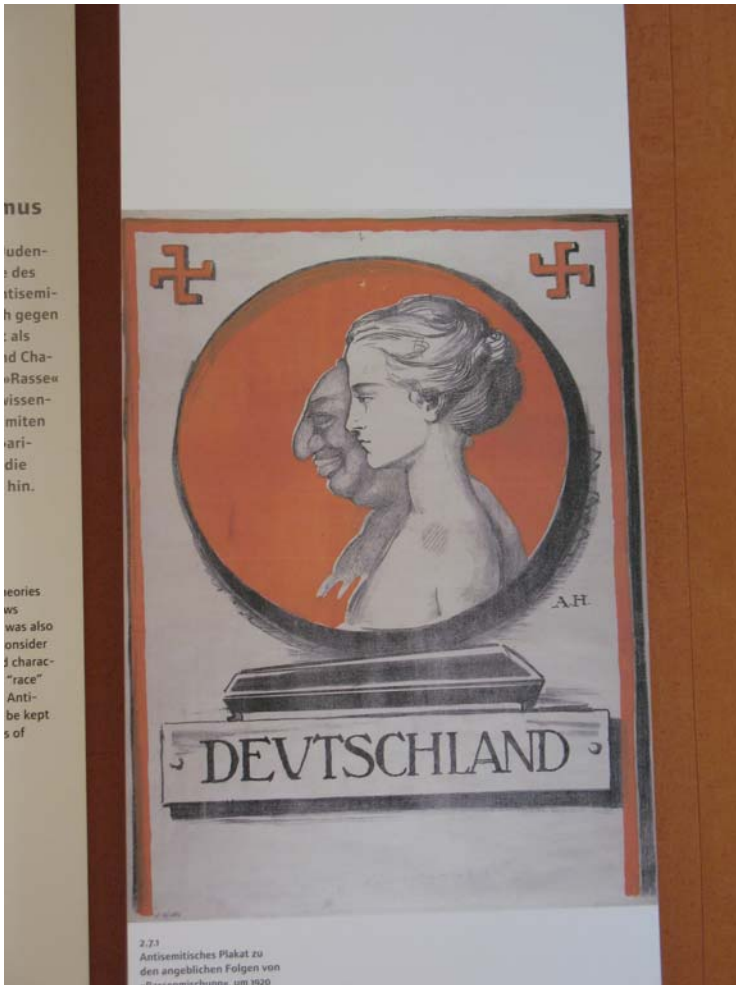


Stones placed in memory

North of Berlin about a half-hour is Sachsenhausen Concentration Camp, one of the first camps for political prisoners, the central administration and training center for the camp system, and finally a death camp for both Jews and Soviet prisoners of war. To this day it is still considered the Model Camp. On the audio tour the announcer actually said that, seen objectively, its one design flaw was the difficulty in expanding it. For me the sadness and horror come not only from the policy of “racial cleansing,” but the rationale it provided for the emergence of utter, ultimate, gratuitous brutality. The Nazis themselves became the antisocial and depraved element that they projected on and abhorred as the “other.”



Ovens at Sachsenhausen



Poster from Wannsee

We drove to the Wannsee lake district, gorgeous, picturesque, and the site of the meeting that sealed the fate of the Jews in Europe. The meeting of top Nazi brass was in an industrialist's lakeside mansion. They set what has come to be called the Final Solution to the Jewish Problem, an expression that is a tragic euphemism for the psychopathic criminal conspiracy to murder an entire people. (Like "Kristallnacht," "ethnic cleansing," and even "Holocaust," the name shapes the history and disguises more than it conveys.) The museum there gives a long view of anti-semitism starting in the Middle Ages and makes a thorough presentation of the ramp-up to the Holocaust that began in the late 1800s. A real education in how the German people wanted for themselves that which has always characterized the Jewish people: a consistent and coherent identity. The internal struggle between the humane and the authoritarian in the search for a national identity is fairly presented. Tragically, the good lost.



ITS Kinderarchives

Our last stop in Germany was a unique and extraordinary agency, the International Tracing Service. At the end of World War 2, Nazi archives were collected in the Allied Zones of Germany and placed in a central repository, administered by the International Red Cross. (A similar cache was also created by the Soviets.) In the last 60 years over 50 million documents have been digitized and cross-indexed. A researcher can instantly find anyone mentioned in the records, which include transports, forced labor camps, and ghettos. The archive has been invaluable in connecting people and also in establishing documentation for claims and reparations. The entire cost is borne by the German government.



ITS Kinderarchives

FINAL THOUGHTS

This has been a remarkable trip. The Remember Us concept of remembering one child at a time and acting in his/her name was embraced across the spectrum in Israel. In a land fractured by disagreement and struggling for unifying ideas, this is seen as one idea on which everyone can agree. Our work for the next year will be to actualize the potential of this possibility.

For myself personally, I learned more about my family and my grandmother and aunts of blessed memory who were murdered in the Holocaust. In Germany my understanding of our history deepened, and I came away mindful of the ways that, through group trance, madness can masquerade as reasonable behavior.

Often people have commented that we did the trip backwards, that it would have been better to see the Holocaust sites in Germany first and then see the apotheosis of Israel. I disagree. For me Israel is truly a miracle, an unprecedented, glorious accomplishment, fulfillment of the promise of millennia, a complex, roiling modern state being built daily by vision, courage, and sacrifice, warm, humorous, tough, alive.

But I'm glad to have seen Germany afterwards. In Germany we already experienced an apocalypse. It is a context that reminds me how tiny, alone, and other we actually are. It is a cautionary tale about how quickly the world around us (any of us) can change. And it is a call to participate in the extraordinary adventure of co-creating and transmitting Judaism in a world such as has never been seen before. Thanks for your interest in these reports, and for the many kind comments we've received.

Am Israel Chai, the Jewish People live.

Gesher