

Journey to Nuremberg: Memory and Reconciliation after the Holocaust

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Two generations after the Holocaust, how does the Jewish tradition understand the concepts of memory and reconciliation, and what do these concepts have to teach us today? In September 2005, a group of HUC-JIR students, alumni, and faculty traveled to Germany, together with American Catholic graduate students in history and theology from the University of Notre Dame, to meet with non-Jewish German and Polish seminarians and explore the enduring impact of history on religious identity and interfaith relations.

The journey to Nuremberg, entitled *Memory and Reconciliation: Building for the Future – Jewish-Christian Relations in Cultural Context*, involved a diverse group from the College-Institute: Dr. Yehoyada Amir, Director of the Israel Rabbinical Program at HUC-JIR/Jerusalem; Adam Allenberg, RHSOE '05 and fourth-year rabbinical student at HUC-JIR/Los Angeles; Dara Frimmer, fifth-year rabbinical student at HUC-JIR/New York; Rabbi Mira Regev, ordained at

HUC-JIR/Jerusalem; and Rebecca Milder, fourth-year rabbinical student at HUC-JIR/Cincinnati. Prior to this seven-day international conference, none of the students had ever visited Germany.

The seminar examined history before, during, and after the *Shoah*, with a particular focus on the International War Crimes Trials held in Nuremberg in 1946. “Nuremberg provided a backdrop where students would be able to physically access what was there, what was missing, and how the post-World War II situation had changed,” explains Dr. Michael A. Signer, C ’70 and Abrams Professor of Jewish Thought and Culture in the Department of

Theology at Notre Dame. “This program broadened the horizons of our Jewish and Catholic students. It enabled them to see that they could share the religious dimension of their life with others and could learn from other religious traditions without feeling put upon or proselytized.”

Joining Rabbi Signer and the group of Jewish, Catholic, and European students were his wife, Betty Signer, the originator of this program (see sidebar); the director of Jewish-Christian relations from the St. Joseph Diocese of Fort Wayne-South Bend, Indiana; and theologians from Germany and Poland.



“Memory and Reconciliation” at work:

1. HUC-JIR and Notre Dame students getting to know each other at dinner.

2. Dr. Yehoyada Amir unrolling the Torah scroll and teaching in a rural synagogue in Tucherstfeld.

3. Adam Allenberg behind the microphone, representing the prosecution in a simulated international war crimes trial.

The group sought insight into the Jewish life that had been destroyed by Nazi Germany by tracing the remnants of Jewish heritage in tours of museums, including the Levi Strauss Museum, and a synagogue in Fuerth. Their visit to the newly constructed synagogue in Bamberg enabled them to witness the renaissance of Jewish life in Germany, as well. Adam Allenberg recalls that he initially found it “strange to come to a place and to imagine that it is like any other, when I have such an emotional tie to its history.”

A walking tour of Nuremberg enabled the group to understand the history of the city and to analyze why they had come on

this journey. They explored neighborhoods once occupied by Jewish families and businesses to see how or if monuments or plaques had been used to memorialize the *Shoah*. This was of particular interest to Dara Frimmer, who says she “paid attention to the monuments and memorials in relation to how they teach about this city’s history.”

Settings from the past served as mobile classrooms to discuss current events. The group walked the grounds where Nazi party rallies took place to understand the political phenomenon of Nazism and conducted a panel discussion on the meaning of public assembly and its effect on political life. As an invaluable lesson on justice, reconstruction, and repentance, the students staged simulated ‘Nuremberg Trials’ in a courtroom setting. The prosecution was represented by a Polish and HUC-JIR student team while the defense was represented by a Notre Dame and German student team.

Throughout the week, much of the interfaith exchange took place in a youth hostel with facilities that were conducive to holding open and honest discussions on justice, reconstruction, and restitution. Students from different nationalities were assigned to room together to encourage communication on a more informal level, with the hope that these relationships would endure long after the program ended. In addition, each day’s itinerary was filled with site-visits in and around the city, social and personal time to digest the information, and small and larger group discussions, both formal and informal, to share reactions and reflections. “When people are able to sit down and really talk, not on a

The journey to Nuremberg was the fourth seminar of its kind, sponsored by a program that originated when the dean of the University of Notre Dame asked Betty Signer to utilize her background in social justice, tolerance, and healing to create a conference that would help educate the community about the *Shoah*. Around the same time, her husband, Rabbi Michael A. Signer, C’70 and Abrams Professor of Jewish Thought and Culture in the Department of Theology at Notre Dame, was asked by a priest, who served as a liaison for reconciliation between the German and Polish community, to invite his American Catholic students to join this dialogue. With his wife’s project fresh on his mind, Rabbi Signer suggested to the priest that he add another component: an American Jewish presence. As a result, Betty Signer’s Holocaust education conference was transformed into a seven-day, international, inter-religious seminar, for graduate students and seminarians from America and Europe, to introduce future teachers of theology to issues of Jewish-Christian dialogue.

As co-chair of the Joint Commission on Inter-religious Affairs of the Reform Movement since 1998 and as a member of HUC-JIR’s faculty for over twenty years before moving to Notre Dame, it was a natural choice for Rabbi Signer to invite HUC-JIR to participate as the Jewish voice at the onset of this program in 1999. Past participants from HUC-JIR have included Dr. Lewis Barth, Dr. Adam Rubin, Rabbi Carey Brown (N ’05), Yuri Hronsky (MAJE & MAJCS ’01), and Rabbi Jeff Garroway (C ’03).

The first two seminars were held at the Center for Dialogue and Prayer in Poland, where students of different faiths visited Auschwitz together. The third seminar took place at the Pontifical Academy of Theology in Krakow, Poland, where the city was studied as the historical backdrop. Next year’s seminar is being planned for Lublin, Poland. The organizers hope to continue these dialogues, extend the list of participants, and one day hold a conference in Jerusalem. **HUC-JIR students are encouraged to participate in the 2007 Interfaith Journey to Lublin, Poland. Please contact Rabbi Michael Signer, msigner@nd.edu or 574-631-7635.**

superficial basis, they get to what needs to be said or the beginning of what needs to be talked about,” explains Betty Signer.

Rebecca Milder found that “students of each faith had a significant role to play in the dialogue – dealing with their own perspective of memory, reconciliation, and achieving a measure of equanimity with a past linked with each other.” Dara Frimmer, in the midst of working on her rabbinical thesis on the topic of memory and identity, noted, “a conference like this gave us a chance to use dialogue and relationship-building to mediate tension between past and present.”

Rabbi Mira Regev added an Israeli perspective to the trip. She said that she was compelled to attend this conference “because it was not only a religious experience; it was more about finding a way to live together through cultural dialogue.” This journey enriched her thinking about

Jewish-Muslim relations, in the context of the struggle for a peaceful resolution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

The faculty on the trip provided valuable role modeling and served as a resource for the participants. Dr. Amir’s work with inter-religious dialogue in Germany for the past twelve years played a significant part in the planning of the Nuremberg trip. Moreover, he served not only as a consultant and advisor to the Jewish students for the Jewish components of the conference; his expertise was also sought out by the Catholic students. One of these students, whose interest centered on modern Jewish-Catholic theology, was able to speak with German and Polish experts as well as with Dr. Amir, an expert on Franz Rosenzweig and other Jewish philosophers.

Each morning began with a prayer service led by one of the religious denominations in the

group. “The majority of the participants had never interacted with Jews before,” notes Rabbi Mira Regev. “During our *Kabalat Shabbat* services, it was the first time that many of the other seminar group members had seen a woman leading prayers.”

Even time spent on the bus served as an opportunity for the participants to share in each other’s customs. On the way to *Shabbat* dinner, the HUC-JIR students taught *nigunim*, melodies without words, to the rest of the group and, in turn, were taught Christian Brotherhood songs.

As part of the *Shabbat* morning program, the Torah study session discussed the excerpt from the weekly portion, *Ki Tetze* (Deuteronomy 22:8): “When you build a new house, you shall make a parapet for your roof, so that you do not bring blood-guilt on your house if anyone

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should fall from it.” As a group, they reflected on this text and its teachings about responsibility to act and to protect the lives of others.

The HUC-JIR contingent acknowledges the indelible impression this journey has made on their individual identities and aspirations as Jewish leaders. Rebecca Milder recognizes how powerfully her rabbinical sermons and teaching will be influenced by this experience. “I have a much more complex picture of the tragedy of the Holocaust with which to educate the Jewish community.”

Rabbi Mira Regev is applying her experiences to her work as an educator in Haifa, a city known for its diverse population of Jews and Muslims living together. “We cannot stay or survive in our own little world. This type of dialogue is an opportunity to look at what we are doing now to help with the healing process so we can all live in today’s reality.”

Dara Frimmer values the opportunity to “examine the concepts of responsibility and accountability during the week of study and dialogue.” She plans to continue her role in interfaith dialogue through email, networking, and building upon these contacts so that she can incorporate these themes into her own rabbinate.

As for Adam Allenberg, he plans to get involved with an initiative his congregation has with a neighboring church. In addition, while working at a synagogue day school he sees yet another opportunity to continue to participate in interfaith dialogue with the local Catholic day schools. “I now see Jewish survival in a broader context,” he explains. “I feel a greater sense of how we are to play a role in the greater world outside of the Jewish community.” ■

Mission to Berlin:

Connecting with German Jewry Today

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- Virtually 100% of German Jewish community functions are funded by the government, while most American Jewish institutions depend on private philanthropy;
- There are over five million American Jews compared to just over 100,000 members of German Jewish communities, which clearly results in a dramatically smaller pool of people with whom to work.

The next day we were divided into small groups and asked to present to the German Jewish leadership the best practices in leadership development, programming, supervision, and volunteer recruitment. At the end of the day-long seminar, our group shared our experiences and reflected on the thoughtful questions raised by our German counterparts and their sincere willingness to learn from our experiences as well as their challenge of our assumptions of how German Jewish communities ought to function.

We came to some conclusions:

- They have virtually no funds to pay professionals to do the work that we do in North America;
- They lack resources to pay for basic staples of Jewish ritual practice, such as *menorot*, *sifrie Torah*, *mezuzot*, and other Jewish ceremonial objects;
- The elected Jewish leadership lacks Jewish training; it appeared that the training we provided was useful to them and encouraged them to think in ways they might not have considered prior to our meeting.

Closing Thoughts

With its history, it is simply amazing that there is a German Jewish community at all. Those with whom we met inspired us to think about how we in North America can recognize and appreciate German Jewry’s unique needs and struggles.

Deborah Mohile, MAJCS/MPA ’94, pointed out to our group that Jews in Germany “have become the *de facto* keepers of the oral, physical, and spiritual history of the Jewish community in Germany.” For many of us, this observation had profound impact. Though the Nazis may have imagined a land that would some day be *Judenfrei* (free of Jews), we found comfort in the fact that a growing, proud, and vocal Jewish community is flourishing in that very land. Ignoring this community would be akin to granting Hitler’s wish.

We departed feeling inspired to stay connected somehow to the Jewish community of Germany. We left with ideas for lending support, arranging student exchanges, and organizing future missions with groups like ours. The fact that German Jewry is not on the radar screen of American Jewish philanthropy and that American Jews have a strong aversion to anything that relates to Germany, ignores the realities on the ground and fails to see the strong case for supporting this growing Jewish community.

It was meaningful to witness the steps that Germany has taken to confront its past, as evidenced by the many memorials and museums. We were inspired by the work of Dagmar Weiler, the Bridge of Understanding’s Executive Director, and her staff of mostly non-Jewish Germans. Devorah Servi, MAJCS/MSW ’01, noted upon our return home, “I was most moved by Dagmar’s commitment to making it possible and certainly more comfortable for Jews to visit Germany. Bridge of Understanding is an effective model for making changes in the ways Jews relate to Germany and to Germans. So often, as a community, we regard Jewish persecution as solely our burden, but clearly, many Germans are grappling with Holocaust history too.” ■