

Do Child Survivors in Germany Enjoy Justice, Respect and Peace, both officially and among the wider public?

By Philipp Sonntag

From 1945 until the present day, the attitudes of both the Federal Government as well as the German population fill the Child Survivors of the Holocaust living in Germany with ambivalence. The World Federation of Jewish Child Survivors of the Holocaust & Descendants (WFJCSH&D) was founded in 1988. When it was decided to hold the 26th conference in August 2014 in Berlin, the WFJCSH&D and its German branch organized it together. We put much thought into formulating the motto:

“Justice, Respect and Peace”.

These three elements are the basis for judging German attitudes toward Jews and, above all, to Holocaust survivors.

We were nervous in the weeks before the conference was held, because we were uncertain how German society would react to the challenge of having Child Survivors from all over the world in their midst. This nervousness is based on the two contradictory attitudes we experience in German society: on the one hand, many people are friendly and protective. On the other hand, anti-Semitism exists. There have even been violent attacks in public on recognizable Jews.

What then was the official political reaction to this conference and how did the media respond to it? The approximately 400 Child Survivors attending were warmly welcomed. Both the political as well as the administrative representatives of German institutions gave us much appreciated financial support, see [Sponsors](#).
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However, there was no official reaction to our motto. The three terms “justice, respect and peace” appear to generate painful and ambivalent feelings in German society when used in connection with Jews. This can cause social tensions. The interpretation very much depends on the context in which the terms are used as well as the political views of the individuals expressing them. Reactions can range from being made welcome to coldness and rejection.

Rebuilding Diversity

“Diversity destroyed” (Zerstoerte Vielfalt) was the name of a large-scale public program of exhibitions held in Berlin in 2013 which gave much information about Jewish life in Berlin before and during the Nazi regime. Through photos, films and texts it illustrated the huge diversity of pre-war Jewish life in Berlin and how it was destroyed after the Nazis took power in 1933. It was very professionally done and encompassed politics, art,

science and every-day life. It showed the systematic exclusion of Jews from society in all its facets and at the same time, named some of the heroes who tried to help. The program was a powerful sign of friendship, sensitivity and effective public support. Present government policy clearly shows a desire to give Jews justice, respect and peace. The personal commitment of well-known personalities with their various public and private roles is very important - for Jews in general and for us Child Survivors in particular.

The term “diversity” is what we want for our future. Dieter Graumann (President of the Central Council for Jews in Germany until end of 2014) outlines barriers and options, in his book “*Nachgeboren – vorbelastet*” (Born after 1945 - still under stress). He points out that the children and grand-children of Child Survivors (called in America “2G” and “3G”, i.e. the second and third generations) are handicapped, they need understanding and support. They suffer because of the stress they went through by growing up with their still traumatized Child Survivor parents, who were often incapable of creating stable families for themselves or for their children and grandchildren.

An additional challenge for the 2G and 3G is the fact that in the past decades, Jewish identity has undergone exceedingly complex changes. They need to define for themselves: what does it mean to be Jewish today? Graumann offers a mental and spiritual framework, urging Jews to concentrate on the future. He makes hopeful and brilliant suggestions. Accepting them, requires much strength and chutzpa.

So far, so good. But what about us aging Child Survivors? At the WFJCSH&D conference in Berlin, we tried to be diplomatic: while we are grateful for the official and unofficial German support for Jews in general and for Jewish Communities, it pains us that we aging Child Survivors are often discounted and ignored. More than once we have experienced injustice, a lack of respect and a breach of our peace.

Justice

In the German language this word has a wide spectrum of meanings and thus of interpretations. The famous “justice scales” makes it possible to dispute on what is just and to distinguish good from bad deeds - in theory. Germany’s self-image is that of a democratic, constitutional State, and it is. However, in practice, maintaining democracy can be very difficult and does not always prevent hair-raising injustices. We have had the painful experience that administrations (not all of them, of course) refuse applications by Child Survivors for support or restitution. And even when it is granted, the bureaucratic conditions can be most nerve-wracking. One example: in 1964, my application for restitution was granted – after long uncertainty – three months after I had completed my university studies during which I suffered badly through financial problems.

A drastic case is that of the “ghetto pensions” which were continually refused on an administrative level until the judge von Renesse insisted that the existing law evidently requires that they be paid out. However, the Ministries involved ruled that this would cost too much money. The judge was then removed from his post. This is only one example of such cases in which our German Section of Child Survivors protested strongly.

We aging Child Survivors well remember the Law 131, passed in West Germany in 1951. It entitled all those who had been public servants under the Nazis to be reinstated in their former positions. This status has protected former Nazis ever since. Is it any wonder if we ask ourselves whether it is a former Nazi who has rejected our latest application for support?

Another factor: public servants appear to have an instinctive reflex to avoid paying out State money. This is not necessarily anti-Semitic. Bundeswehr soldiers who were badly wounded when fighting abroad, had to go fight the administration to get the support they were entitled to.

After retirement, public servants – including former top Nazis - receive monthly pensions of over €3000. This is paid out automatically within the framework of official laws and regulations, without any application having to be made. In contrast, someone who survived the persecution by one of these Nazis as a child, is granted €300 only after applying for it, IF it is granted at all. An important aspect to be considered is that many Child Survivors were so traumatized that they were often unable to build successful careers and thus have small pensions in their old age.

This is a firmly established injustice in Germany's constitutional State! No matter how illegitimate it is, we have the precedent that malignant or even only thrifty administrators can easily reject our applications for support. Some administrations demand documents from Child Survivors to prove that they were persecuted. Such documents do not always exist. Some Child Survivors know nothing about their origins, let alone do they have documents to prove their identity. This makes it easy for people to falsely claim persecution. In the course of time we Child Survivors have become experts in discerning an authentic from a fake Child Survivor. It is a modern phenomenon that people who had traumatized childhoods - but for very different reasons - claim to have survived the Holocaust. They are also in their way deeply unhappy and need psychological help.

As long ago as in ancient Rome it was said that when in doubt, judgment should always be in favor of the defendant. This should definitely apply all the more to victims, such as Holocaust survivors. We demand that in difficult cases, the administrators be less bureaucratic and State regulations be interpreted more flexibly. After all, 70 years after 1945 there is little danger of wasting State money by giving support to a fake victim.

There is another group of Child Survivors in Germany called "Phoenix From the Ashes". Their approximately 400 members come from the former Soviet Union. Although they were invited to come to Germany, they are not recognized as Nazi victims. The disastrous consequence is that they now live in poverty and are dependent on State welfare. During the last few years I have three times petitioned to the German Parliament on this issue. In vain. For details see: <http://www.holocaustonline.de/> and the new book

Heistver, Alexej (Hrsg): "Wer überlebt, der erzählt", Verlag Koch & Raum
Wismar 2015

It contains shocking details of Nazi persecution and describes how, as early as 1941 "even before the Wehrmacht marched in (to the Baltic countries and the Western Ukraine) the locals robbed and murdered Jews with great enthusiasm." It also describes the effects of anti-Semitism after 1945, which continues to the present day. Some forty

members of the Phoenix group from Eastern Europe attended the August 2014 Child Survivor conference, reported on their situation and enabled discussions about it. In the book (page 35) Prof. Vladimir Solonari emphasizes:

“It is important to realize that the stories related in this book must be seen against the background of the approximately three million Jews in the Soviet Union who could not tell their stories, because there was no happy end for them.”

Fortunately Dr. Josef Schuster / President of Central Council of Jews in Germany, did outline a strategy to achieve a better result, through pressing the German government to accepting former activities (work in post-Soviet states) of these Child Survivors (Zukunft 8/2015, p. 2).

Rather little interest so far had been shown in Germany for these Nazi victims and thus little justice or respect, in contrast to that given to the perpetrators and active Nazi criminals. Freedom of opinion is a basic principle in the FRG and guaranteed in the constitution. As a consequence, the police commits itself to protecting Nazi marches. E.g. 80 Nazis gathered on the Alexanderplatz for a demonstration and were protected by some 800 policemen. The counter-demonstrations of anti-Nazis are usually much bigger and in Berlin some of them were organized by our member Andrée Leusink. Anti-Nazis often emphasize that “fascism is not an opinion, but a crime.”

The Federal Constitutional Court has not banned rightwing and Nazi parties, although these continually call for the committing of crimes, themselves commit crimes and praise the crimes committed under Hitler. During a recent local election campaign, they issued a poster that hung on many lamp-posts in Berlin calling upon the population to “*Gib Gas*” (apply gas). Not only shocked Jews and Child Survivors saw in this a cynical call to kill more Jews, and many people protested. The outrageous reply of the Nazis: it has nothing to do with gas-chambers, but merely refers to traffic problems (!).

Respect

Although the program “Destroyed Diversity” of 2013 was full of respect for our Jewish identity and the Jewish contribution to German society, the situation for Jews is still very ambivalent. While Jews are accepted both officially and in general, what actually happens and how Jews feel can be very different. There are situations in which Jews are treated like foreigners and feel excluded. Sometimes, a Jew whose family has lived in Germany for centuries, will be told that his homeland is Israel and may also be made responsible for the conflicts in the Middle East. Not a few Germans insist that it is time to draw a line and forget Nazis crimes. They were, after all, ”so long ago.”

Such attitudes cause some Child Survivors to lead secluded lives. They avoid talking about their experiences before 1945, let alone about the damaging consequences it had on their lives afterwards – except among themselves. This is why our bi-annual meetings are so important. At the same time, and this is where the ambivalence comes in, during the last few years there has been a strong increase in requests to tell our stories in public as witnesses, and many relevant books are easily available.

In his book “Verweigerte Rueckkehr” (Denied Return - Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 1999), Hans Frankenthal reports how he returned to his home-town in Germany after surviving both Auschwitz and slave labor under horrifying conditions in the underground Dora Mittel-Bau factory, and also a death march. He is welcomed back and is occasionally asked where he had spent the war years. When he answers truthfully, they accuse him of lying. Such painful reactions illustrate that there is a long way to go before the general German population will accept Jews into their midst as normal Germans. In his book, Hans Frankenthal describes numbers of such experiences and comments (page 148):

“There is hardly any discussion about their crimes – on the contrary, again and again I had to listen to the legend about the “clean Wehrmacht”.

And:

“No German soldier can convince me that he knew nothing. During their retreat through the Russian towns every soldier must have noticed that only some 10% of the inhabitants were still there – the slaughter, even the lowest ranks knew about it. Much has still to be exposed, but we will not live to feel the satisfaction of hearing Germans at last admit to their crimes”.

He did not live to hear it, because he died in 1999, six months after his book was published.

“The Germans” have published much in the media and elsewhere about Nazi crimes. At the same time, incorrigible Nazis and their sympathizers raise their voices again and again. For Jews, encounters with the general German population can differ greatly. While today there is a stronger positive tendency than in the past, anti-Semitism is often covered up by a criticism of Israel, often making Jews in Germany responsible for Israeli government policies.

Considering this situation, it is understandable that Child Survivors feel at ease, understood and accepted largely only when among themselves. This is why our four-day meetings, usually in Bad Sobernheim near Frankfurt/M., are so important. It is understandable that misunderstandings and agitated situations may arise there. One person’s story can revive another’s painful memories. That is why we need therapists at these meetings.

The problems of a Child Survivor in Germany are not limited to the past. We still need to cope with multifarious and serious consequences. We need restitution not only for past persecution, not only medical and social care; we also need help for current psychological problems as well as pragmatic support for the Child Survivor groups. The organizers of these groups are all volunteers. Nevertheless, we need approximately €20,000 to maintain the activities of our German group. This probably also applies to the 54 Child Survivor organizations worldwide. So far, we have managed to raise money through projects for some of our needs, but most Child Survivors are over eighty and we are unable to continue taking on this kind of stress.

Respect and Support for the aged Child Survivors

When we have applied to the responsible institutions for financial help as restitution and on the basis of being a non-profit organization, the reply is usually: No! We then pointed to the German law laying down how organizations are entitled to receive financial support from State institutions and suggested that this could and should be applied also to us. After all, §2,3 of our statute can make it easy to correctly control a use of funds, because we promote:

1. Contact between the members;
2. Self-help and mutual help;
3. Jewish culture and Jewish life;
4. Celebration of the Jewish holidays;
5. Bi-annual all-German Child Survivor meetings, accompanied by therapists;
6. Regular meetings of the regional groups;
7. Solidarity with other victims who survived the Nazi terror as children;
8. Contacts to Child Survivors and their organizations in Europe and throughout the world;
9. Creating an archive to collect the autobiographies and family stories of our members;
10. Contributing to the political education of the growing generations;
11. Encouraging understanding between the people of Israel and Germany.

While the official speeches declare German support for the victims of the Nazis, officials who should be using the existing laws to support our activities contradict these speeches through their routine refusal of our requests for financial help. Why is this contradiction not embarrassing to the State, let alone to the official who formulates the refusal? Is it because we Child Survivors have no influential lobby to state our case?

It is interesting to compare our rejected applications with the State expenditure for other purposes. In our democratic society there are many institutionally State-financed organizations which exist to support charitable causes. Some provide well-paid jobs for their functionaries. Dozens of billions of Euros are given to the Claims Conference for medical and social services to support us, for museums and for Jewish organizations. Of course we appreciate that! The State also spends huge sums on buildings and maintaining and providing police protection for memorials for Nazi victims. At the same time the State also maintains unspeakable fascist memorials. It is now planned to put aside 70 million Euros for the renovation of the Nazi *Reichsparteitag* grounds in Nuremberg. In our view, it should have been destroyed in 1946! Our needs could be satisfied with only a fraction of this sum. What is more important: lifeless stones well polished and protected, or the living Child Survivors?

For the very low cost of one million Euros for all 54 groups (about 20.000.- Euros per group) it would be possible to let these groups care for themselves in a decent way. It would be easy for an experienced administration such as the Claims Conference to administer sponsored activities of the world-wide Child Survivor organizations.

Even a few thousand Euros for our modest and civilized needs seem to be a problem for the State. We were once given a written commitment for €4000 annually, but this was cancelled only one year later. We ask ourselves: are we doing something wrong? Are we too old and weak to be listened to? A current example: In March 2015 a suitable hotel for

our bi-annual meeting in October had been accepted and published, but July 2015 it was cancelled. For our board members it turned out to be a tedious task and a major challenge to find a new suitable hotel, and we have to cope without our familiar therapists.

We realize that our situation and that of the WFJCSH&D is not clear even to the Jewish Institutions in Germany. Although about half the Jews and those with Jewish origins are not members of the Jewish Communities, we accept them as members. The close link between the State and religion as exists in Israel and Germany is an alien concept in most countries of the 54 WFJCSH&D groups. E.g. at the world conferences in Warsaw in 2011, in Las Vegas 2013 and in Berlin 2014 (the three I attended) it was not possible to find ten men (Minjan) for an early morning service. Andrew Hilkowitz, the president of our German group, helped out in Warsaw, and I did the same in Las Vegas. Between five and ten Percent of the participants of WFJCSH&D conferences want kosher food, most of them reject it. Thus also in Berlin kosher food was only available after request at registration.

It appears that time is needed for even the Jewish Institutions to respect us, including our attitudes and habits. A first step has been achieved in that the Jewish and other German institutions are friendly and all public administrators “helpful” within the framework of their belief in the regulations. But we must remember that an administrator’s first reflex is to protect State money and we are seen as unentitled petitioners. What we (and other Child Survivor groups world wide) need for our activities - which are always organized by volunteers – per annum is less than the common salary of one of the many single administrators!

Many administrators are active on our behalf in the whole of Germany – often receiving their salaries from the State - because of what Germans did to us and to those who did not survive. Yet, when we need a small sum to organize our activities independently, the application is refused! Seldom does one come across a public servant who has the sensitivity to even notice that this is scandalous.

For example: In Berlin there is a branch of a publicly financed Institution which was created to look after the social needs of Jews and help them wherever possible. I was told that they would support Child Survivors. I made an appointment and was made to feel welcome with coffee, biscuits and friendliness. I then asked: Could you provide us with a room for two hours each month where we could meet? The answer: no. I asked: could a secretary type some letters and texts and file them away for us? No. I asked: Could we get computer and internet support? No. Could we borrow a beamer and receive support for our documentations? Might we get any sort of financial assistance? The answers were always friendly and were a definite: forget it! And that was in the year 2015!

Despite such disappointments, we are not giving up and since August 2015 we have gained contact to another Jewish office, that might be willing to help us at least administratively.

Under these circumstances it is not surprising that there were enormous difficulties on the administrative, official and social levels when our planning for the WFJCSH&D conference in Berlin began. Originally, it was to have been held in 2013 but had to be postponed, because none of the German officials realized that holding the conference in

Berlin was a political issue. They needed a whole year to understand that. Once they did, however, the necessary support at last became available.

There have always been official organizations for specific themes, like for the victims and survivors of Bergen Belsen, of Sachsenhausen, etc. Thus, President Gauck invited 27 Child Survivors to his Bellevue Castle in June 2015. They included survivors of Auschwitz, Buchenwald, Bergen-Belsen, Ravensbrück, Mittelbau-Dora, Sachsenhausen, Dachau, Flossenbürg and Neuengamme. All of them concentration camps. That is laudable in every respect. However, we Child Survivors were completely ignored. And this, despite the fact that he had agreed to be the official patron for our 2014 conference. At the same time, he did not come to our official reception nor was he willing to write a brief message to be printed in our program. Again we asked ourselves: Did we do something wrong? These examples show that we still have much to do for the public recognition of our role in society – 70 years after 1945. Perhaps this situation can be explained by the fact that the Child Survivors Deutschland e.V. was founded very late (2001) and that we have no lobby and very limited resources, and may be with a certain independent mind. In view of our age and our limited ability to work because of our childhood sufferings, we cannot expect a breakthrough, but we are doing our best to act as witnesses of that time.

A tragic consequence is that our childrens' and grand-childrens' (2G and 3G) difficulties are seldom noticed let alone acknowledged in German society. We are worried about their future. In Germany, there is even less understanding let alone sympathy or support than for us. These generations bear an extraordinary burden. When some of us in the German Child Survivor group suggested taking them into our organization, as is normal in other countries, it led to such arguments among us – their parents and grand-parents - that we had to drop the subject – for the time being. However, we know that the 2Gs and 3Gs urgently need respect and support. We are painfully aware that due to the traumas we experienced before 1945 numbers of us were unable to create “normal families”. We were often over-protective, fearful, depressed and self-pitying. Thus, we passed our own traumas onto our children. During a group therapy at one of our bi-annual meetings, there was a big conflict because participants blamed each other. It was not possible to resolve the conflict in this setting and the problem could not be solved.

In June 2015 we, at last, invited 2Gs to set up their own group and left it up to them how they want to relate to us. The future is open. Opportunity for 2Gs to contact their group:

zweite_generation@yahoo.de

Peace

Any form of violence can trigger alarm and panic among Child Survivors. In Germany we feel more or less safe. The probability of being attacked is about once in 40 years and physical violence is rare. For the conference in the Hilton Hotel we had, of course, arranged for special security measures. There were a couple of strange incidents (rude insults), but no dangerous attacks.

What dangers could the Child Survivors expect when they left the Hotel? There is sometimes violence in the S-Bahn or the U-Bahn, usually late at night and on the city outskirts, if young aggressive gangs enter a carriage with only one or a few passengers. It

can be important to not behave like a possible victim. Usually the train driver will hear the attack and call the police. If it happens on the outskirts it can take some time before they arrive, but in the city itself they usually come very quickly. However, in the case of an attack, public sensitivity and support can be very helpful.

One example: In August 2012, Rabbi Daniel Alter was walking along the street with his then 7-year-old daughter in the Berlin suburb of Schöneberg visibly wearing his Kippah. Four teenagers asked him if he is a Jew. When he answered “Yes”, they insulted him, beat and injured him and threatened his daughter. He had to be treated in a hospital. He received much public support in the media and at the end of 2012 he was made “Officer for Anti-Semitism” in the Berlin Jewish Community.

During elections, Nazis gain only a couple of percent of the votes. While they are not represented in the Federal Parliament, they are in one (Mecklenburg-Vorpommern) of the 17 regional parliaments. Nazis organize demonstrations again and again, but usually they are very much out-numbered by the counter-demonstrators.

All Jews, including the Child Survivors, wish Israel all the best. Many people travel to Israel. But Israeli politics is controversial and there have been some fierce debates around it.

People in Germany are still very conscious that the Second World War was a catastrophe, but the utmost danger of an atomic war – be it in Europe or the Middle East – is not an issue. At the moment, the likelihood of a war in Europe that could affect Germany is seen as so unlikely – even after Russia took over the Crimea and the conflict in the Ukraine broke out – that hardly anyone considers it possible. Germany is much more concerned with internal security. The authorities are much more much more concentrated on observing left-wing extremists and left politicians. When the eleven murders committed by one group of right-wing extremists (National Socialist Underground) could no longer be ignored after ten years, a tremendous amount of activity was developed to form committees and put one of the culprits on trial (Beate Tschaepé), but nevertheless and as usual the known neo-Nazis were left unchallenged in their actions.

The same applies to the Nazis in the public services, even in federal Ministries. Although much money was spent to investigate the presence of Hitler’s Nazis in the Ministries, and their names and positions were listed, this had no consequences, and as usual all still receive their enormous pensions “in peace”.

It remains necessary to keep an eye out for Nazis in the public service. On the one hand there are obviously still numbers of Nazi sympathizers active, for instance in the Ministry which is responsible for paying out the ghetto pensions. On the other hand it is important to emphasize that many public servants, administrators and politicians are very friendly and constructive when dealing with us Jews. The Foreign Office gave us exemplary support for our WFJCSH&D conference in August 2014.

We are glad to see that the Central Council of Jews in Germany receives much public assistance in its activities to rebuild Jewish culture and science which can become a valuable part of German culture in the future. And as far as the safety of Jews in Germany is concerned, the positive sides of the constitutional State are used for our

protection as can be seen in the continual police presence in front of Jewish schools and synagogues.

Future Prospects

It is to be hoped that the efforts being made to integrate Jews into German society will be so successful that fascism in all its forms is kept in check, and so that such protection of Jewish buildings will no longer be necessary.

The Child Survivors and their children are highly sensitive to all forms of indirect violence, be it arbitrary administrative acts and also to all forms of State-tolerated direct violence. When speaking publicly about our past experience - often mustering our last strength to do so -, we aged Child Survivors emphasize again and again, how important it is to avoid all forms of violence. I find it impressive how many fragile Child Survivors go to schools and talk to the growing generation and thus contribute to creating a better future.

The 26th WFJCSHD conference in 2014 in Berlin gave us aged German Child Survivors new hope. We experienced great friendliness from numbers of public servants. This, however, is small consolation for the fact that the struggle for “Justice, Respect and Peace” is just as nerve-wracking as it has always been. We still often have the feeling that we have been hidden away so that our needs can remain unnoticed, and that officialdom is waiting for a “biological solution”. That is a signal of insufficient respect, justice and peace. It refers to the very often quite small restitution sums for Holocaust survivors, and similarly to the small and inflexible support granted for the activities of our organization. At the same time, in limited fields we enjoy understanding and practical support by some representatives of society. This what makes up the ambivalence.

On this background, the conference in Berlin with its strong global solidarity of the Child Survivors among themselves was a wonderful, even if so far unique experience. For us Child Survivors and for Jews world-wide we wish a future of constructive solidarity between ourselves and sympathetic integration into the global society.