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Working Off the Past, from Atlanta to Berlin

Susan Neiman

Anti-Semitic incidents in Germany get more international press than such incidents elsewhere. What receives far less attention is the way that Germany reacts.

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Bruce Davidson/Magnum Photos

Atlanta, Georgia, 1962

I began my life as a white girl in the segregated South, and I'm likely to end it as a Jewish woman in Berlin. Lest you suppose I'm tracing an arc that strides the space from perpetrator to victim, let me complicate the story. The question of whether Jews should count as white people was not quite settled in the South where I was born. "There's an old saying," Reverend Wheeler Parker Jr., who was Emmett Till's cousin, told me. "If I was Catholic and I lived in the South, I'd be worried. If I was Jewish, I'd be packing up. If I was black, I'd be gone."

When I was eight years old, my best friend solemnly declared she could no longer play with me. We had a lot in common: a preference for building tree houses over playing with Barbie dolls, a love of books involving games in the woods that often revolved around searching for a door to Narnia. Still, she ended our friendship after hearing that the Jews had killed Jesus. The temple where my family worshipped had been firebombed, and most of the Jewish community kept their heads down. I am proud that my mother did not. My parents had moved from Chicago to Atlanta in 1955, shortly before my birth. My mother's involvement in the campaign to desegregate Atlanta's public schools was sufficient to earn her a photo in *Look* magazine and a number of late-night calls from the Klan.

If we were not considered to be perpetrators, neither did we consider ourselves victims. Jews *had been* slaves in the land of Egypt and, as such, were obliged to liberal solidarity with other oppressed peoples. That was the major tenet of my mother's homespun theology. Much later, it must have played a role in my decision to study philosophy, and to find my way within philosophy to the work of Immanuel Kant, that dry Prussian professor who wrote the metaphysics of universal justice. It was Kant who insisted that all rational beings should obey the same moral law, and not even God is exempt.

None of my family was a victim of a concentration camp or, as far as I know, a pogrom. Safely landed in Chicago by the early twentieth century, my grandparents never spoke of the Eastern Europe they'd left behind. On the contrary, the only grandfather I knew was fiercely American. The first in his family born outside of Odessa, he had a touch of Yiddish accent, but he adored Teddy Roosevelt, visited all the national parks, and served in both world wars. His love of Lincoln was so strong that when he came to visit his Atlanta grandchildren, he taught us all the words to "Marching Through Georgia," which we blithely sang in an open convertible, oblivious of any impact it may have had on those Atlantans disinclined to celebrate the march that burned their city to the ground.

Today, it's easy to smile: no wonder I never felt at home in the place. At the time, it only enforced my sense that we were fighters for justice and right. Like any American child, I learned something about the Holocaust, but it was too far away to dent, or even shadow, my own life.

What were present were moments like the sticky summer day in Georgia when my mother invited an African-American friend to bring her children across town to play in our yard. Five years after *Brown v. Board of Education*, native white Atlantans were threatening to close down the school system rather than integrate it, a threat some counties carried out. Using skills she'd learned in an early stint in advertising, my mother and her friends from the newly organized HOPE—Help Our Public Education—were working to forestall the violence the Supreme Court decision ignited elsewhere. Meanwhile, she wanted to prepare her children for desegregation by arranging what was not yet called a playdate. The black folks we knew

were all someone's servants, and she wanted for us to have equal and normal relations with African Americans who were not. That's why her friend from the movement was there.

Our backyard was large and surrounded by woods where we could hide, hunt for arrowheads, play Capture the Flag. But it was too hot for any of that, and no amount of lemonade could change it.

"Let's go to the pool," I said.

"We can't," said my mother shortly.

"Why *not*?" I began to whine. "We *always* go to the pool when it gets this hot."

"We just can't," said my mother. I was too young to notice whether she and her friend exchanged glances.

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"Then can we go to the lake?" The park at Red Top Mountain was usually muddy, not as nice as the pool, but the air was getting stickier by the minute.

"We can't go to the lake today either," said my mother.

"Why *not*?" I demanded, encouraging my little brother to chime in.

In the end, we had to settle for playing under the sprinkler that watered the grass. I didn't settle graciously. How could I guess that it was against the law for black and white children to swim together, not only in the big concrete pools to which white Southerners flocked on such days but in the lakes that studded the county by the grace of God? As far as I could tell, my mother was just being unreasonable. Perhaps it was unreasonable to imagine that she could construct normal relations, even for an afternoon, in a system as violent and unreasonable as the segregated South. I'm still glad she tried. By the time I knew enough to apologize for the embarrassment my fuss surely caused her, she had trouble remembering the day.

Southern plants still pull me deep, as though I had roots there. Dogwood, honeysuckle, azalea, even a magnolia tree in the backyard of my childhood. The newness of green: chlorophyll sounds like medicine, but that green is the color of life itself. It's the promise that grips us, the world that begins again with each new leaf and each new life, unmarred by sticky fingers or sandbox scuffles. My mother always wanted to follow the springtime, starting in the Deep South and driving steadily north to catch that moment of color again. She never did. Every budding tree reminds me of her longing.

Apart from the plants, what sticks in memory are the places I made my own: the smell of hot rain as it hit the marble steps of the local library I visited every week, the kudzu-draped ruins in the woods that must have been a mansion burned by Sherman's troops. We lived in one of the prettier not-quite-suburbs on the edge of northwest Atlanta, but everything made it apparent: we were never of them. My insufficiently Southern accent was suspicious. One day, I turned in a homework assignment that the teacher had requested: we'd been told to ask our parents about their hobbies, the organizations to which they belonged. I still remember the

look on my teacher's face upon reading that my mother belonged to the ACLU. "Isn't that a subversive organization?" ("Mommy, what's subversive?" I had to ask when I got home.)

My mother's friends were the few liberals, mostly white and Episcopalian or Unitarian, who shared her political views. After the dismal failure of my own first friendship, I didn't try very hard to make more. And there wasn't another girl in the area who got lost in long discussions of the books she loved or preferred the woods to Barbies. To be honest, I was pudgy, nearsighted, and terrible at sports, any one of which could have left me feeling lonely even in Brooklyn. But I'd never been to Brooklyn, and I spent my childhood dreaming of leaving the South—either for Europe, which I knew entirely from Ludwig Bemelmans's *Madeline* books, or for Greenwich Village, which I imagined as a leafy but talkative town.

At the age of twelve, I got lucky. I joined the first integrated youth group in the city, the Actors and Writers Workshop, an after-school program that offered a handful of budding liberal bohemians a house where they felt at home. We were taught that theater and writing required hard work, not just goodwill. We all shared convictions about the issues at the forefront of Atlanta politics, but we didn't meet three times a week just to feel good about ourselves, though it did feel good to be somewhere we could share what were—at that time and place—minority values. We were making art, and the director we called Rob took his job as seriously as if he'd been on Broadway, not directing a bunch of lonely, lost kids who, in the years we got a grant from the city, performed on a flatbed truck parked in one ghetto parking lot or another. Our parents soon learned that the best way to get us to do anything, like homework, was to threaten to prevent us from going to the workshop. Even on the rare Saturday when there were no rehearsals or classes, we'd gladly come to Juniper Street just to sweep the floors or diaper the baby. None of us suspected she would become Julia Roberts, and it wouldn't have mattered anyway.

The workshop was an outpost, itself not altogether at home in Atlanta. We came to offer helpless condolences at Martin Luther King's house the day after he was shot, for the three eldest King children were part of our classes. Not much of the white South was in mourning when Dr. King died. "Alabamans didn't cheer the way we did when Kennedy was shot," says the Alabama historian Diane McWhorter, whose finger on the Southern pulse is surer than mine. "But at the time we did think our troubles were over and the South would go back to normal without King stirring it up."

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If the South never felt quite like home, five years in Tel Aviv, decades later, failed to make me Israeli. Perhaps that's why I feel so easy in today's Berlin, which has become a haven for many who feel at home nowhere else. I'd hardly felt easy on first arriving at Bahnhof Zoo station to a gaggle of punks panhandling on the stairway, German shepherds at their feet. In my imagination, German shepherds called up ghosts screaming "*Halt!*" or "*Juden raus!*" A couple of months at a Goethe-Institut in Freiburg had extended my vocabulary but barely dented my fears.

Berlin in 1982 was so far off the beaten track that it wasn't hard to convince more than one foundation to support me for the year I'd said would be spent studying German philosophy, though it was hardly the whole truth. Berlin had an aura that radiated, however faintly, all the

way to Cambridge, Massachusetts, where I'd studied for eight years. When I was asked, rather often, "How can a nice Jewish American set foot in Germany, and for a whole year at that?" I countered with a question: Forty years after the war, wasn't it as racist to condemn the whole German nation as it had been for Germans to condemn the Jews? My answer suggested that *I* had worked through the Nazi past sufficiently to forget all about it and focus on Kant and Goethe. I may even have believed it at the time. Now I know better: I came to Berlin not because I'd gotten over the Nazis; I came because I wanted to know more about them. I was writing about the nature of reason, and they provided a world-historical question mark.

I soon felt exalted by the heady sense of abandon, the feeling of being forgotten in a city in limbo. Neither East nor West, but a state-subsidized playground between them, Berlin was studded with reminders of the war that no one had the inclination or the money to remove. We lived in splendid old apartments whose ceilings often sported cracked plaster angels, whose facades often sported mortar holes. We carried buckets of coal from the cellars to heat the tall ovens that kept us warm. And there was, of course, the Wall, which was often the subject of dark irony, at least in the West. What else could you do with an object that, two decades after its construction, felt like a piece of the natural world? With ruins of one kind or another in your face at any moment—one popular bar called *In the Ruins* punkily fetishized its crumbling walls—it would take a great deal of effort, or a great deal of intoxication, *not* to think about history.

And that was the most thrilling of all. *Vergangenheitsaufarbeitung*—working-off-the-past—was one of the first words I added to my German vocabulary, which was slowly freeing itself from images of tight-lipped men in uniform barking "*Jawohl!*" Working off Germany's criminal past was not an academic exercise; it was too intimate for that. It meant confronting parents and teachers and calling their authority rotten. The 1960s in Germany were more turbulent than the 1960s in Paris or Prague—not to mention Berkeley—because they were not focused on crimes committed by someone or other in far-off Vietnam, but those considerably closer to home, committed by the people from whom life's earliest lessons were learned.

That autumn of 1982, those who came of age in the 1960s were adults in their thirties, working-off-the-past with special intensity, for the fiftieth anniversary of Hitler's election was approaching. There seemed no end of books and speeches, as well as exhibits like "The Architecture of Destroyed Synagogues," "Gays and Fascism," "Women in the Third Reich," "Resistance in Neukölln." The arts academy offered workshops on making films about the Third Reich. There were performances of music the Nazis banned and performances of music they promoted, with lectures accompanying each. Neighborhoods competed with each other to explore their own dark history.



Odd Anderson/AFP/Getty Images

A white rose laid next to one of the *Stolpersteine* plaques commemorating Holocaust victims in Berlin, Germany, January 27, 2019

This and much more could be found in Berlin, where a play called *It Wasn't Me, Hitler Did It* that opened in 1977 would run for thirty-five years. My new friends warned me that Berlin was unique: it had always leaned left, while the rest of Germany was less inclined to face the skeletons in its closets. But I wasn't in West Germany, I was in the former capital of the Reich, whose eastern and western halves vied with each other to produce the best form of working-off-the-past. As I took it all in, the half-buried fears I'd brought with me began to recede, leaving sympathy and admiration in their place.

In 1982, most Americans in the city were members of the occupying army, which did not withdraw until Germany was reunified in 1990. Hence I was often the first Jew many Germans had met. Raised with images of Jews that were confined to gaunt prisoners in concentration camps or Orthodox men in prayer shawls, it didn't occur to them to apply the word to me. Conversation involved a perpetual balance between announcing it and avoiding it. I hadn't been raised in a particularly Jewish community; I hadn't yet been to Israel; if any book about Jewish identity seemed written for me, it was Isaac Deutscher's *The Non-Jewish Jew*. I had no inclination to deny it, if only they would ask. They never did.

What happened instead was the sort of conversation I had with a pleasant man at a party of left-leaning activists and diplomats. "You know," he said after a second glass of wine had loosened our tongues, "I bet you come from the southern part of the United States." "How did you guess?" I replied. "I can't say exactly," he replied. "It's something about the way you move—your voice, your hands—I imagine it's like the difference between northern Europeans and Mediterranean peoples." I began to laugh. "As it happens, I was born in Atlanta," I told him. "But I'm an atypical Southerner. What you're noticing is that I'm

Jewish.” The gentleman was mortified. “Oh, *no!*” he cried. “That isn’t something I would *notice!* That plays no role for me at all.”

Given minimal familiarity with American culture, and about a minute in my company, most people assume I grew up on the Upper West Side. It’s not just the dark curly hair or the fact that I tend to talk fast and wave my hands at the same time. I can’t explain it either, but the mixture seems to signal *New York Jew*. Such people find this story hilarious. Germans do not get what’s funny. They were raised with the notion that Jewishness is something unpleasant, and probably smelly, so that noticing it would be a sign of bad manners. Like white Americans proudly asserting that they do not notice color, they fail to notice the history of assumptions behind *that* claim.

In 1982, I could not have known that the year I’d planned to spend there would mark me for life, turning a vague fascination with a city into a deep, complex love. Staying in Berlin made thinking about ethics as a grounded, constant presence; any concrete slab or bullet hole could remind you of moral questions. We are historical beings, unable to describe ourselves without describing ourselves in space and time. And unlike other animals, we cannot grow up without considerable input from our parents, with whom we need to come to terms if we are ever to truly separate from them.

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Two decades after I unwittingly embarrassed the man at the party, I was part of the national German committee to plan celebrations for the 2005 Einstein Year. One hundred years after Einstein made his most famous discoveries, the left-leaning government had decided to spend 20 million euros to show its support of science in general and of left-wing cosmopolitan (ahem!) intellectuals in particular. As the only Jew on the committee, my main function would be as what Orthodox Jews call a *mashgiach*—someone who guarantees that the premises are kosher. There were exhibits, there were banners, there were lectures, and more. What if they made a mistake?

I spotted one in an early brochure, where Einstein was described as a “fellow-citizen-of-Jewish-background.” Did the committee know, I asked, that Einstein had expressly ridiculed that weird circumlocution? “He just called himself a Jew,” I said. “Jews don’t consider the word insulting.” “Is that so, Frau Neiman?” replied the minister of science. She was flustered. “That’s very helpful, just the sort of thing we need to know.” *Jew* in German has two syllables, not one, and I suppose that buried deep in some dreams are memories of sinister mobs shouting “*Ju-dah! Ju-dah!*” Perhaps even for atheists, echoes of Judas Iscariot play a role. Germans use phrases with nine syllables, like *fellow-citizen-of-Jewish-extraction* or *fellow-citizen-of-Jewish-heritage*, in order to avoid using the obvious two. The habit is so engrained that despite my objection, the second draft of the brochure used the same phrase. “I know we all have many duties here,” I said at the next meeting. “But perhaps it has been forgotten that I mentioned that Einstein didn’t like this designation. He made fun of it several times.” I was learning to use certain forms of polite circumlocution myself. “Of course,” said the minister’s deputy. “We’ll see it gets changed.” They never did; too many nightmares worked against them.

Between the encounter at the party and the committee meeting, my life took several turns. I’d seen nascent working-off-the-past in the 1980s, and I left Berlin because stories like the first bothered me more than the occasional right-wing rhetoric or traces of Nazi jargon. I had

married a Berlin poet, and after our son was born, I began to long for a place where a Jewish child could be someone ordinary. That wish, I confess, was compounded by the widespread Berlin opinion that nothing very interesting would ever happen there again. My first book, *Slow Fire*, described Berlin life in the 1980s, which were drawing to a close around the consensus that the action had moved elsewhere. A year before the Wall fell in 1989, I accepted an offer to teach philosophy at Yale.

Even without a premonition of what might be in store for the city I'd left behind, I spent my second night in Connecticut drinking an entire bottle of wine, in tears. The difference between Berlin's intensity and New Haven's dismal mixture of suburb and ghetto was screaming. But a contract had been signed, an apartment abandoned, and I settled in to enjoy what there was to enjoy: wonderful students, interesting new friends. After my twin daughters were born, there was no time for regret, or much of anything else. I did apply for a professorship in Potsdam, but my marriage had ended by the time I received it. Instead, I took my children to Israel for a sabbatical, hoping to find a home. We stayed five years and became Israeli citizens while I taught philosophy at Tel Aviv University. They were young enough to assimilate easily, while I chewed on Ben-Gurion's claim that the first generation of immigrants to Israel would always be lost; all that mattered were the children. My misgivings were not political: the peace process had yet to collapse, the second intifada was still to come. But when approached by the Einstein Forum, which was looking for a new director, I wasn't entirely closed to alternatives, even though I said no at the start.

"Do you actually know what the Einstein Forum is?"

The more I learned, the more I was tempted. The Einstein Forum was founded just after German reunification with two concerns in mind. The first was the wish to build intellectual and cultural institutions in the former East Germany, whose own institutions had been gutted through the removal of anyone considered close to the fallen Communist regime. There were already complaints that the wave of removals served as an excuse to find jobs for Western intellectuals who'd been unable to get them on their own turf. Hiring an American, therefore, was one way to sidestep East-West strife.

The second concern was less local. Disturbing signs of right-wing nationalism had emerged in the wake of reunification, and every single one attracted international press. At the same time, Brandenburg—the largest of the new states, which surrounds Berlin as Virginia and Maryland surround Washington, D.C.—discovered that it had symbolic treasure in the form of a dilapidated wooden cottage Albert Einstein built in 1929. What better way to send a signal for internationalism and progress than to throw a little money in its direction and hope something interesting might emerge?

I knew none of this when invited to apply for the job. "Is there an intellectual agenda I'd have to follow?" I asked at one of several interviews. "Because if you're hiring me to be a Jew coming to Germany from Israel, I have to say I don't intend to spend the rest of my life talking about *Vergangenheitsaufarbeitung*." (Somewhat hilariously, I thought I was done with the subject at the time.)

"You'd be free to do whatever you want," I was told.

"Like talk about the Enlightenment?"

“This is Potsdam. We’d love it.”

Most of my philosophical work has been devoted to defending the much-maligned Enlightenment, the eighteenth-century movement that created the foundations for universal human rights. Potsdam is the home of the summer palace where Frederick the Great entertained Voltaire and other Enlightenment thinkers. The emperor later had the philosopher arrested, but for two years they had a good run, discussing the best and the worst of all worlds. My teenage heroes were de Beauvoir and Sartre, so I’d never felt entirely at home in the Ivy League. The chance to open philosophical questions to a broad general audience was unique, and Potsdam was close enough to Berlin to allow me to live in the city that still touched my heart like an unresolved love: *it couldn’t be all over between us!*

There remained the question of what it meant to raise three children who considered themselves Israeli in the former capital of the Third Reich. Today, nothing in Tel Aviv is trendier, but in 2000 I was called a traitor for merely considering leaving Israel for Germany. A decade earlier, I’d decided against it; there seemed no way that foreigners, much less Jews, could feel truly at ease in Berlin. But watching an African man in dreadlocks talk back to a careless driver on one of several trips I made to discuss the job convinced me: the new Berlin wasn’t just a matter of hype. The thought of a foreign—any kind of foreign—comeback at a German on a street corner was unimaginable in the 1980s. We were all too frightened. Was it the change from a long conservative tradition to a Social Democratic–Green government? The fact that the capital, and with it more foreigners, had moved to Berlin? Whatever the causes, you could feel it on the street: the changes were dramatic, certainly enough to suppose that three Israeli-American-German children could grow up there without feeling they had to cower.



John MacDougall/AFP/Getty Images

Claudia Vanoni, the office-holder of Berlin's recently created post of attorney general in charge of anti-Semitism matters, at the Superior Court of Justice, Berlin, March 22, 2019

Twenty years later, I still wake most mornings feeling grateful for my good fortune. The Einstein Forum is thriving, and I was lucky to find a lovely apartment in a neighborhood still dicey enough to be affordable. On sunny summer days, you'd be forgiven for thinking you've landed in multicultural heaven. On my block alone, there's a Kurdish, a Finnish, and a Brazilian café where live music spills out onto the sidewalk on warm evenings; a Danish bakery; a Moroccan restaurant; and a Greek delicatessen. Walk ten minutes in any direction, and you'll find one of nine small bookstores. One specializes in Polish literature, with poetry readings and music some evenings; another in English fiction.

On Tuesdays and Fridays, you can buy bread and fish, fruit and cheese, and most anything else you need at the outdoor market next to the canal that used to be called Oriental. Though about half the vendors and a third of the buyers are Turkish, some functionary in the new Berlin clearly worried about Orientalism and changed the name to something innocuous. (I cannot swear that the functionary read Edward Said, but I know that the police chief of my district saw the movie about Hannah Arendt.) There are many women who cover their heads, the older ones rather grimly, the younger ones with style and sass. In this part of town, the jostling, bargaining, and banter between Muslims and non-Muslims at the market is unfailingly friendly.

Yes, of course, I read the news, and even if I didn't, I have plenty of friends who do. In the wake of the heavy press coverage of the Israeli-Arab man attacked in 2018 for wearing a kippah, one worried old friend wrote from Los Angeles: Were my children and I safe? Anti-Semitic incidents in Germany get more international press than such incidents elsewhere. What receives far less attention is the way that Germany reacts. Even before the kippah attack was recorded on video, Chancellor Angela Merkel had created a new, high-ranking office to combat anti-Semitism. After the attack, twenty-five hundred Berliners, including the foreign minister, demonstratively wore kippot at a rally in front of the Jewish Community Center, and the demonstration was front-page news for days: "Berlin wears a kippah" was the headline in my local daily paper.

A few days later, the parliament voted unanimously to officially declare the existence of the State of Israel a part of German *Staatsräson*—reason of state, or national interest. Anti-Semitism, says the new official in charge of combating it, has remained fairly constant in 20 percent of the population, now intensified by two complicating factors: the rise of the far-right Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) party and the influx of Arab refugees raised on anti-Jewish propaganda. It's not far from the percentage of incidence of anti-Semitism in the United States as soon as you leave the large cities, and it's certainly no worse than the levels of anti-Semitism in Great Britain. The difference lies in the response to it. In Germany, condemnation of anti-Semitism was swift, sharp, and serious. It came from the top of the government and was echoed by most voices outside it. In the United States, after Charlottesville, Nazis were excused. In Britain, the Labour Party's response to charges of anti-Semitism was self-destructively slow.

No one in Germany denies there's more work to be done. This became especially clear in 2017 when Merkel's conservative party lost votes and the new far-right party gained them in the wake of her 2015 decision to admit a million refugees. Good Germans are ever on the watch for signs of resurgent racism. They view those developments with gloom and expect that worse will follow. What will develop in a world where the number of refugees is

growing is anyone's guess; what's clear is that Germany's past no longer provides complete immunization against the wave of nationalism now sweeping the world.

None of those developments cut against the fact that Germany was the only country in the world that showed any leadership on the refugee crisis. The German historian Jan Plamper showed that despite the AfD, active engagement to support refugee integration grew from 10 percent of the German population in 2015 to 19 percent in 2018. The last figure was determined by Germany's renowned Allensbach Institute, and it showed that far more Germans supported the refugees than voted for right-wing parties. What's been termed "the welcome culture" is the largest and broadest social movement in Germany since the war. Had Americans wished to compete with German generosity, they would have had to absorb five million refugees within a year on a fraction of the landmass. Instead, anti-immigrant campaigns succeeded in persuading Britons to leave the EU—and helped to elect an unhinged swindler in America.



Gregor Fischer/picture alliance via Getty Images

A volunteer distributing yarmulkes to young Berliners as part of a campaign to tackle antisemitism and religious bias, Germany, 2018

What about the Jewish question? Thirty years ago, I wished that Germans were aware I was Jewish, or at least weren't shocked when they found it out. Although they often knew quite a lot about concentration camps, they knew next to nothing about living, breathing Jews. This year, several German friends sent emails wishing me happy new year, in Hebrew. A Swiss Jewish historian is the president of the German Historical Museum. Berlin now hosts an annual Jewish film festival, a Jewish Culture week, an Israeli-German arts festival, several Jewish magazines, and no end of hummus joints. Should you wish to become a rabbi, you can choose between a Reform, a Conservative, and an Orthodox seminary. Thanks to Chabad, the Lauder Foundation and immigrants from Russia, the Orthodox Jewish community is growing, as is the community of Israelis who leave their country to escape its Orthodox-

dominated government. Being Jewish is so fashionable that a number of German rabbis are actually converts.

Buying matzo in the 1980s was not quite secret, but it carried an aura of stealth. There was only one store that sold it, along with kosher wine, gefilte fish, mezzuzot, and falafel. After the store was bombed in 1977, the owners exchanged the sign reading “shalom” for one that read “oriental specialties.” You had to know where you were going in order to get there. Now, the only problem in shopping for Pesach is the fact of competition, as I discovered on a last-minute search for matzo meal last year. Everyone was sold out. “We underestimated,” said one owner. “Don’t bother going across town. There’s no matzo meal left in Berlin.” As I was wondering how long it would take to grind matzo piece by piece, I remembered that the parents of Israeli friends who were coming for Pesach might bring an extra box. You read that correctly. Israelis left home to enjoy the Seder with their children and grandson in Berlin. Next year in Jerusalem?

Nothing reflects the change in spirit more than the commemoration of May 8. In 1985, President Richard von Weizsäcker made headlines as the first major West German politician to call the day the war ended a day of liberation. Until then, the German defeat was viewed with ambivalence, and whoever was not ambivalent kept quiet. I failed to appreciate the speech at the time, for I could not grasp that the taste of defeat was still so bitter forty years after the war that Weizsäcker’s use of the word *liberation* was revolutionary. (Imagine Virginians celebrating the Confederate surrender at Appomattox, and you’ll have a rough idea of the effect.)

Today, one of the directors of the Maxim Gorki Theater is Israeli, and the theater produced a three-day festival to commemorate the war’s end. There were edgy theater and video productions, sassy dialogue about Jewish and Muslim gay men, a comedy about circumcision, and a discotheque playing a mishmash of hip-hop and Russian folk. “We have something to celebrate!” shouted one of the organizers as we danced to an accordion in the foyer. Outside the theater, over Berlin’s largest boulevard, a flag fluttered. “We won,” it read in German, English, and Russian. After Weizsäcker’s speech, antifascist Germans, foreigners, and the few Jews in town breathed a sigh of caustic relief: finally, a West German politician admitted that May 8 was not a day to mourn. But to celebrate it with a flag that declared “we won”? I cannot imagine who would have dared.

This essay is adapted from the author’s introduction to *Learning from the Germans: Race and the Memory of Evil*, published this week by Farrar, Straus, and Giroux.

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Clinton's Charm

November 4, 2004 issue

Susan Neiman

Susan Neiman, an American moral philosopher, is the director of the Einstein Forum in Berlin, Germany. Her books include *Why Grow Up?: Subversive Thoughts for an Infantile Age* (2015), *Moral Clarity: A Guide for Grown-Up Idealists* (2008), *Evil in Modern Thought: An Alternative History of Philosophy* (2002), and *Slow Fire: Jewish Notes from Berlin* (1992). She studied philosophy at Harvard and the Free University of Berlin, and before her present post was a professor of philosophy at Yale and Tel Aviv Universities. (August 2019)

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