Holocaust Remembrance and Heidelberg

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DURING THE WEEK OF SEPTEMBER 10–16, 2001, the city of Heidelberg, Germany, invited the "former Jewish citizens of Heidelberg," those Jews who fled the Nazi regime between 1938 and 1945, to visit the city for a week-long, all-expenses-paid program with a companion of their choice. This was the second time Heidelberg had hosted its former residents. Scheduled at five-year intervals, the first gathering had been in 1996; the next is planned for 2006. The 2001 program included fifty former Jewish residents of Heidelberg for a total group of 115. Most came from the United States and Israel, but a few others returned from Brazil, France, Switzerland, and Germany. The city of Heidelberg provided the coordinating staff, assisted in a variety of ways by a local organization, *Förderkreis Begegnung*, led by Konrad Müller, and, also, by two very impressive local teachers engaged in documenting the history of Heidelberg's Jewish community.[1]

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1. Those local teachers, Norbert Giovannini and Frank Moraw, co-edited a publication, *Erinnertes Leben. Autobiographische Texte zur Jüdischen Geschichte Heidelbergs* [*A Life Remembered:Autobiographical Essays on the Jewish History of Heidelberg*] (Heidelberg: Wunderhorn, 1998). Published as a result of the 1996 gathering of former Jewish citizens of Heidelberg, the book contains autobiographical essays covering the period of the Weimar Republic, the Nazi assumption of power, and the time of deportation and Jewish emigration.

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The terrible events of September 11, 2001, in the United States, which coincided with the opening day of the program, added a nightmarish quality to our visit, compelling us all to reflect upon not only the death and destruction of the Holocaust but also the contemporary horrors of war.

However, because of the time difference between Europe and the United States, we only learned about 9/11 later in the first day of events. In her opening remarks that first morning, Mayor Beate Weber saluted the courage of those who returned, acknowledging frankly that "coming to Heidelberg has certainly not been an easy journey. It is linked with a readiness to remember—to remember what happened in Heidelberg, in Germany, in Europe more than a half century ago. I honestly thank you for this readiness and this gesture of reconciliation." Mayor Weber discussed some of the dangers posed by right-wing extremism in contemporary Germany and noted a disturbing lack of knowledge about the Holocaust on the part of many young people. For example, she observed: "One out of five young people has never heard the name of Auschwitz. Dachau and Treblinka are foreign words without meaning." She indicated that the city of Heidelberg was undertaking a number of commemorative and remembrance activities in addition to this week-long program as a way to address this ignorance and counteract its effects. She concluded her welcome thus: "The world often associates romantic Heidelberg with an image of the castle, the old town, and the Old Bridge. May I transfer this image to you, because through your visit here in Heidelberg you all become builders of bridges—bridges between different times, generations, nations and even between joy and sorrow."[2] At the conclusion of the mayor's welcome, she invited the former Jewish citizens to inscribe their names in the Golden Book of Heidelberg, which all did, many with tears in their eyes. Here they were, placing themselves back in the historical record of the city of their origins.

Such gatherings are not peculiar to Heidelberg. German cities and towns have been organizing programs for former Jewish citizens for decades. Such events function both as apology and as demonstrations of the strength of Germany's contemporary democracy. Indeed, the federal government funds a program, "Bridge of Understanding—The Jewish Experience of Modern Germany," which specializes in bringing delegations of American Jews to Germany. Such programs also combat contemporary social ills. Eyewitnesses to the Holocaust speak out now while they can, challenging the neo-Nazi movement. Also, these programs allow Germans of good will to do something positive to ensure that this terrible chapter in history is never repeated.[3]

2. Translation of speech by Mayor Weber, 11 September 2001, provided by city of Heidelberg.

3. Bernard Mehlman, Rabbi Emeritus, Temple Israel, Boston, telephone conversation with Martin H. Blatt, 12 December 2001; Robert Garback, stationed with US military in Heidelberg, e-mail, 6 March 2001. See Robert Weyeneth, "The Power of Apology and the Process of Historical Reconciliation," *The Public Historian* 23, no. 3 (2001): 9–38.

It would be quite interesting for historians to study several such programs and examine the motivations and feelings of the German and Jewish participants, the social and political dynamics, and the outcomes. However, since I do not speak or read German and I am not a student of modern German history, I am not the scholar to undertake such a project. What I do here, rather, is to provide a personal account of my experience in Heidelberg, which I visited, in 2001, as a companion to my mother, who managed to flee from the Nazis and make a new life for herself in the United States. Not only have my family roots in Heidelberg influenced my life greatly, but also I have been an active player in the public history field for twenty years. Among my professional interests and passions are memory, history, and how the past interacts with the present and the future. This seemed to be an excellent opportunity to explore how historical inquiry consists of the "combined study of both *what happened* and *how it is passed down* to us," in the words of James Young.[4]

My mother, Molly Blatt [nee Amalie Freund] was born in Heidelberg, Germany, on January 13, 1920. She grew up in a prosperous, upper-middle-class Jewish household. Her parents managed a successful wholesale egg and retail grocery business. At the age of 18 in August, 1938, she decided, in concert with her family, that she should leave Nazi Germany. She left alone, not knowing if she would ever see anyone in her family again. She traveled by train to Le Havre, France, where she boarded a ship that transported her to New York City. Her father was arrested the night of *Kristallnacht,* November 9, 1938, and held for several days in Dachau, released, and subsequently arrested again in October, 1940, along with many of Heidelberg's Jews, and taken to Gurs in the Pyrenees, where he died of dysentery on December 25, 1940. Her mother and brother departed Heidelberg in January, 1940, and joined Molly in New York. Her brother Henry was drafted into the United States Army and died on December 25, 1944, as a result of hostile fire in Europe.

That is a straightforward narrative account of my historical ties to Heidelberg, but it does not communicate the great significance my ties to my mother's family and Heidelberg have had in my life. My mother's mother, Clara Freund, my Oma (German for grandmother) was a wonderful woman, strong, deeply caring, generous, and never embittered. The memory of my uncle, Henry Freund, affected me profoundly. Henry died aboard a troop transport sunk by a mine; his ship was carrying reinforcements to the Battle of the Bulge. As a young boy, I had nightmares of drowning on board with Henry or watching him die and being powerless to help. My mother and grandmother told me that I looked and spoke like Henry and had progressive social values, as did he.

In Heidelberg in 2001, I vividly recalled my participation in the March Against Death, a 1969 protest against the Vietnam War in Washington, D.C.

4. James Young, *At Memory's Edge: After-Images of the Holocaust in Contemporary Art and Architecture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 11.

Each participant carried the name of a dead American soldier around his or her neck on cardboard and carried a candle in a silent march from Arlington National Cemetery to the Capitol Building, where the name was laid to rest in a mock coffin. I have not forgotten the name of the soldier that I carried back then: Benjamin Kissling of Texas.

I imagined then a conversation among Kissling, my uncle Henry, and myself about the lunacy of war and the need to struggle against war and for social justice. The impact of that march has stayed with me to this day. When I related this experience to my mother and grandmother, they both wept. These were women who had suffered through many painful moments, and it was the first time I had ever witnessed them crying. I don't recall seeing my mother weep again until the death of my only sibling, my sister Jean, in 1998.

The birth of my first daughter connected directly to profound memories associated with Heidelberg. Emma was born on Christmas Day, 1994, the anniversary of the deaths of my grandfather Adolf Freund in a Nazi prison camp and Henry Freund in war. For many years I had a deep dislike for Christmas because it symbolized for me their deaths. Further, I associated Christmas with the bombing of Hanoi and Haiphong in Vietnam, which occurred at Christmas time and elicited virtually no protest from the American public. For me the holiday chatter of peace on earth and good will to men was nonsensical hypocrisy. Then, my daughter was born, giving me a life to cherish on this day. Her birth started me on a trajectory that eventually led me to reconnect to my own Judaism at the urging of my wife, who converted to Judaism.

When I learned from my mother about the week in Heidelberg, I had compelling personal and professional motivations to attend. I urged her to participate and told her that I would be happy to accompany her. My sister Jean, who spoke German, had visited the city. My mother had been back once to Heidelberg since 1938 when she spent one day in the city with my father (now deceased).

However, my 81-year-old mother was not at all certain. She wrote an essay, "Voices in My Head," just a week before our departure in which she expressed her feelings:

> Ambivalence . . . That's what the voices in my head are humming. I am about to spend one week in the town of my birth. I cannot call it my hometown. . . . By sheer accident of birth I came into this world in a very beautiful city in southwestern Germany called Heidelberg. By another stroke of fate a government set upon the elimination of anyone Jewish or remotely non-Aryan came into power when I was a 13 year old high school student. I was lucky and came to the United States in 1938. In my mind Park Slope, Brooklyn, New York, is my home. The city government of Heidelberg extended an invitation to those former citizens of the Jewish faith who were forced to leave between 1938 and 1945. You might even bring along a companion. This made up my mind for me. My son, who

happens to be a historian, was delighted to have the opportunity to see my town of origin and meet some of my surviving friends. He will also meet German historians with a special interest in survivors.

[The prospective program is a full agenda but] the planned event that really gets me is the unveiling of a plaque in memory of a teacher named Hermann Durlacher. He was a teacher of the Jewish faith in the elementary school system. The Nazi government forbade Jews to teach Christian children and no longer permitted Jewish children to attend public schools. Durlacher organized instruction for the Jewish kids. He was my brother's teacher for Henry's last one and a half years in Germany.

I told my son that Durlacher wrote to me and my mother in New York from Camp Gurs in the Pyrenees Mountains, a concentration camp where he was interned with my late father and all the other Jews who were left in southern Germany in October, 1940. My son insisted, and rightly so, that I find his letter and bring it with me to the unveiling of Durlacher's memorial plaque.

I have boxes of letters and memorabilia of those days and it took me the better part of two hours to find Durlacher's letter. The paper my father and Hermann wrote on is thin and faded. The envelope had been opened and the contents censored. The plea was for help, food, some warm clothing, and especially a request by Hermann to contact his brother somewhere in the U.S. for assistance in sending an affidavit for speedy immigration. My father had affidavit papers, but the American immigration system went by quotas and there was a long waiting period for anyone born in what was then Poland. So, he perished in Gurs from dysentery on Christmas day. Durlacher and his wife survived Gurs only to be shipped to the Auschwitz crematorium. Going through all these old papers which included letters from my family, from friends, old photos of the 1930s and 1940s really got to me. Had I looked through all these boxes before committing myself to a trip to Heidelberg . . . I might have declined. Well, my son is coming with me . . . I will meet three good old friends who lived near me. One was my classmate from first grade through high school. She is coming with a granddaughter. They are coming from Brazil and Israel. . . .

I will try my best to be open minded and enjoy the week. The planners seem to try hard to make amends for the events that took place long before they were born. Still, my feelings are mixed...and can you blame me?[5]

Quite fortunately, my mother had already decided to go. The week would prove to be a positive experience for each of us, though, of course, in different ways.

Heidelberg was as beautiful and inviting as my mother had always described. I could see, for example, where and how she had developed her abiding love and knowledge of flowers and nature, as both forest and mountains surround the city. Growing up in the heart of Brooklyn, New York, I never developed such a sensibility. I also learned much about German history, especially the Nazi era, but also the periods before and

5. Molly Blatt, "Voices in My Head," Park Slope Senior Center writing class, 2 September 2001.

after World War II, and I listened to the compelling accounts of others who escaped from Germany.

Where I felt excited and interested, my mother and the other former Jewish citizens felt nostalgia, pain, and anger. My mother and the others experienced this trip as a visit, *not* as a return to their home town. Home for these Jews was now the United States or Israel or Brazil. Germany could no longer be thought of in that way. Yet, here they were in the city of their birth and childhood. This led to a kind of emotional roller coaster for many.

After the mayor's welcome in the morning, we went on a bus tour of Heidelberg. On the ride, the guides informed us that Heidelberg had been devastated both during the Thirty Years' War (1618–1648) and the War of Succession (1740–1748). In mid-afternoon, we stopped at a mountainside restaurant overlooking the city and the Neckar River. I remarked to my mother how the history that the guide had just been imparting made me think of the Nazi onslaught and the utter senselessness of war. My mother interrupted me—in what would prove to be our strongest disagreement on the trip—and asked me just to look at the beauty around us. Indeed, it *was* breathtakingly beautiful. Then, in the next breath, she denounced the Nazis for taking all of this away from her. This strong positive feeling for Heidelberg as a place and for much of German culture continually clashed with her knowledge of the brutality and violence visited upon her and her fellow Jews by the Nazis. This duality would have made the week exhausting for her on some level even without the added burden of the events of 9/11. As we went inside the restaurant for our mid-afternoon cake and coffee that day, cell phones started ringing, bringing us the ghastly news of the World Trade Center and Pentagon attacks and Flight 93 in Pennsylvania.

Even on our very first afternoon (September 10), my mother had found memories flooding back, energizing both of us. The names of streets and city squares came to her in an instant. Everywhere we turned triggered a memory or an association, some happy and some bitter. We saw the bank where her family conducted business and the building that had been the post office. We visited the site of the old train station, now gone, from which the Jews of Heidelberg, including Molly's father, had been taken to Dachau on *Kristallnacht* and later deported to Gurs prison camp. This is a busy location and would be a good place for a historical marker or public art for commemoration, but there is no such designation there now. We searched for and found on *Bunsenstrasse* the rooming house where her family had been sent after being forced out of their apartment of many years. We saw the exterior of the apartment building where her family had lived earlier, 77A *Rohrbacherstrasse*.

Throughout the busy week of activities, my mother and I spent considerable time with childhood friends whom she had seen only a few times in the sixty-three years since she fled Germany. Ilse Rothstein came with her granddaughter Tal from Israel, as did Dorle Basnizki Kaufmann. Dorle's

Four female prisoners stand outside a barracks behind a barbed-wire fence at the Gurs transit camp. This photograph was shot secretly by Alice Resch-Synnestvedt, a relief worker from the American Friends Service Committee, during her stay at the camp. (Photo credit: Hanna Meyer-Moses, courtesy of USHMM Photo Archives)

sister, Hede, and her daughters traveled from Brazil. Ilse's son, Tal's father (whom I have never met), grew up referring to me as "Marty America," because he inherited my outgrown clothes with my name on the clothing label tag. It was a delight for me to meet my mother's old friends and to witness their mutual pleasure at being reunited. Frances Weiss, also eighty-one years old, drove thirty-five miles to Heidelberg for this reunion when she heard from her older sister that the former Jewish citizens were in town. Catholic, her parents had refused to cooperate in any way with the Nazis and her father, a teacher, had been jailed for a time due to his refusal to join the Nazi Party. Now more than half a century later, she brought gifts of flowers, cookies, and books of German poetry to welcome her old friends.

Thursday, September 13, our group attended the dedication of the plaque to Hermann Durlacher, the teacher who had organized the school for Jewish children which Molly's brother Henry attended after the exclusion of Jews from the regular schools. Durlacher, my grandfather Adolf Freund, and so many other German Jews had fought for Germany during World War I. Of course, this service meant nothing to the Nazis. Durlacher, my grandfather, and many others were deported to Gurs. I had often wondered over the years why so many of Heidelberg's Jews were shipped to

Gurs in southern France, but I had never bothered to find out the answer. In fact, the regional leadership had made the decision to rid southwest Germany of its Jewish population and thus to "Germanize" their region. The plan to deport those prisoners who survived Gurs to concentration camps in the east developed later; originally, they were all to be shipped to Madagascar. I found it especially moving that the mayor reported to us that "for many years a delegation from all major cities in Baden [including Heidelberg] has gone to the Pyrenees in order to commemorate the dreadful deportation" to Gurs.[6] This is an annual program commemorating the expulsion.

The *Landhaus Schule*, site of the Durlacher plaque installation, was where my mother attended lower school. She excitedly pointed out to me and the others the locations of the separate entrances for boys and girls, a detail that she remembered from seventy-five years before. The program audience in the school gym consisted of our group, school children, and Heidelberg citizens. At 10 a.m. precisely, Norbert Giovannini's presentation about Durlacher was interrupted so that we could stand for a moment of silence to pay homage to those killed on 9/11. The adjacent church bells tolled beautifully as we all stood. Looking around the gym, I thought of the many victims of Nazism and those who had just died on 9/11 and as I looked into the faces of the former Jewish citizens around me, I sensed that they were reflecting on historical and contemporary losses. It was a tragic and poignant moment.

Following the dedication, Molly and I made a quick visit to the open air market where her family used to shop before we headed off to a gathering of former Jewish citizens and students, organized by Frank Moraw in a local *gymnasium* or high school. There I was particularly struck by the thoughtful questions raised by two teenage boys. I sought them out after the formal presentations concluded and our conversation continued into the street outside the school, despite the pouring rain. These students had thought carefully and deeply about the Holocaust, German responsibility, the problematics of memorials, and international questions of social justice. Later in the week one of them attended the *oneg shabbat* (meal after service) at the recently built Heidelberg temple. Not only was I impressed with these students, but I also was greatly moved. In a world filled with violence and injustice, I found their intelligence and clear sense of social responsibility truly heartwarming.

My mother and other former Jewish citizens of Heidelberg also participated in a panel presentation to a group of teachers assembled by Frank Moraw at the *Hölderlin Schule* (middle and high school). She spoke about

6. Norbert Giovannini, "Herrman Durlacher and the Jewish *Volksschule* Department between 1935 and 1940," 13 September 2001, English translation provided by city of Heidelberg; Jacob Toury, *"Die Enstehungsgeschichte des Austreibungsbefehls gegen die Jüden der Saarpfalz und Badens 22./23. Oktober 1940—Camp de Gurs,"* [The Origins of the Order of Deportation of the Saarpfalz/Baden Jews]; *Jahrbuch des Instituts fuer Deutsche Geschichte* 15 (1986): 431–64.; Mayor Beate Weber speech, 11 September 2001.

her personal biography and reviewed the letter authored by her father and Durlacher that had been mailed to her and her mother in New York. These intergenerational gatherings with students and teachers were critically important in the transmission of the lived experiences of these former Jewish citizens of Heidelberg to current citizens. Indeed, there could have been several more encounters. Surely meetings could have been facilitated between faculty and students at the University of Heidelberg and the former Jewish citizens. Both my mother and I felt that we would have been quite happy with a bit less wining and dining and touring and more programs that facilitated genuine exchange between her cohort and the citizens of today's Heidelberg. My mother's generation is literally passing from the scene. She and the others in the group have testimony about the past and feelings about the past and present, mediated by each of his or her own circumstances, which are critical for today's Germans to engage. Many of the former Jewish citizens may never get to Heidelberg again, so such intergenerational contact was critically important.

On Thursday, September 13, our group visited the city's Jewish Cemetery. The next evening featured *Shabbat* services at the new temple in the city. Unlike many Jewish cemeteries in German cities and towns, the one in Heidelberg was not destroyed during the Nazi period. My mother wanted to go to the cemetery so that we could visit two gravesites and so that I could see how beautiful it was. Set on a rather steep mountain in a forest setting, the cemetery's lush green beauty was bathed that day in a drenching rain. There was general concern about the former Jewish citizens, all of whom are old, climbing along on the sharply inclined trails. With luck, no one fell down. My mother told me that her family had often frequented the cemetery for peace and respite from stress. On that day, we visited the gravesite of Molly's paternal grandfather, Michael Freund and his first wife and Molly's namesake, Amalie Freund, as well as the gravesite of Jeanette Dornberger, my mother's maternal grandmother. Our guide that day and the person in Heidelberg responsible for the upkeep of the cemetery and maintaining the plot location list was a non-Jew employed by the city, a fact which my mother thought was remarkable.

Nazi thugs burned Heidelberg's Jewish temple to the ground during the nationwide *Kristallnacht* in November, 1938.[7] This was a fate that befell many temples across Germany. The city is planning to build a low wall delineating the outline of the destroyed synagogue and to erect an accompa-

7. According to Larry Tye, "Germany has even modified the meaning of words in a bid to be sensitive to its Nazi past, recasting *Kristallnacht* as *Pogromnacht*, . . . to make clear that Jewish lives were smashed along with property the night in 1938 that the Brownshirts went on a rampage." Larry Tye, *Home Lands: Portraits of the New Jewish Diaspora* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2001), 52. It is my sense, though, that *Kristallnacht* is still the much more common reference in Germany, and this is certainly true in the United States. For a discussion of the significance of the date of *Kristallnacht*, November 9, in German history and memory, see James Young, *The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 23–25.

nying plaque. Located in the historic *Alt Stadt* district, this prime piece of real estate remains undeveloped and will stand as a memorial. In recent years the city of Heidelberg and the state of Baden-Wüertemberg provided the initial funds to build the new Heidelberg temple where we attended services. My mother felt that the structure is too modern, strangely out of place in a historic city replete with handsome, venerable structures. The modern temple thus stands as a living reminder of the elimination and reinsertion of the Jews. At any rate, the service was traditional in that men and women were seated separately. The most memorable part of the service was the blowing of the *shofar*, a horn typically employed at the Jewish New Year, *Rosh Hashonah,* which was then less than a week away. This unusual use of the *shofar* was designed to honor those who died on 9/11; it was followed by a melodic prayer, and the combination was quite haunting. I noted that there was a police presence when we entered the synagogue and upon our departure. This special treatment to ensure the safety of both local and visiting Jews is part of the overall approach by official Germany today to provide for and protect its Jewish population.

The prayer books were in Hebrew and Russian, not German. Germany has, since the 1980s, experienced a major influx of Russian Jews. Larry Tye writes that Germany's Nazi past, "a past spent trying to cleanse its soil and soul of anything remotely Jewish," explains why Germany "has opened its doors" to the Russian Jews while its neighbors "are slamming theirs shut." Germany, he writes, is doing penance. "If the world happens to notice, and pay homage to how much Germany has changed, all the better." As a result of the surge in Russian Jews, several new synagogues have been built across Germany, often using significant amounts of public sector funds, in cities whose Jewish communities and synagogues were destroyed by the Nazis.[8]

Our last full day in Heidelberg was Saturday, September 16. That day had been left unstructured. Molly and I were joined by my German colleague Sabine Schindler, and we returned to a site whose exterior we had visited and which we had passed several times over the course of the week: 77A *Rohrbacherstrasse*, the apartment building of ten units that had been home for Molly. At my urging, we were going to try to visit her old apartment. Here is how my mother describes our experience:

> We climbed three flights of stairs and I was a lot more winded than when I last remember going to our apartment as a teenager. Catching my breath and hoping for the best, I rang our old bell. Would someone slam the door shut?
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> A very gracious young woman opened up. "I lived here 63 years ago," I said in German. "I spent the first 18 years of life in this apartment. Might my son, our friend, and I come in for a few minutes?" A pleasant young man heard my request in the background and both welcomed us as if we were long lost friends.

8. Tye, *Home Lands*, 34; Toby Alexander, "New Center and Synagogue Reflect Rebirth of Munich Jewish Community," 30 July 2001, Jewish Telegraphic Agency.

There is no doubt in my mind that the couple living there, the man a high-tech professional and the woman an art history teacher, knew precisely the meaning of my mother's slightly cryptic introduction. The fact that they welcomed us in so warmly was heartwarming and thrilling. When the woman invited us to sit down and have some tea or a cold drink, Sabine and I hesitated, wanting to take our lead from what Molly wanted to do. She remained standing, and so did we. Perhaps even in this welcoming environment, she was not comfortable enough to sit down, as too many difficult memories were stimulated. Was it too odd to sit as a guest in a place that had been home for eighteen years and then summarily seized by the anti-Semitic regime?

My mother continued:

> The rooms looked small but familiar. The kitchen and bathroom were sparkling and modern. No potbelly stoves in the rooms. No icebox in the hallway. I looked out the rear window of the room I used to share with my grandmother to show my son the two large buildings my family had built as storage houses for our egg wholesale business. We used to have laundry lines on the flat roofs and pigeon houses against the rear walls. Now there is a second story and the entire rear buildings seem to be graduate student housing units.
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> The little balcony in the front was my grandmother's favorite reading spot. I was very devoted to my grandmother and she passed away only a few weeks after I left Germany in August, 1938. I was glad that she was able to die in her own bed in her accustomed surroundings. We took a photo from the balcony overlooking the *Zaehringerstrasse*.
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> We had a pleasant visit with the present residents. . . . Marty and the gentleman who lived there exchanged business cards. He is an amateur photographer and has a grand print of the balcony view which he promised to send us.
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> What an emotion-filled half hour we spent that Saturday afternoon. It makes you wonder—how could such horrible things have happened to us in the 1930s and 1940s? These folks did not have to be told what made my family leave our house and business. They made us welcome.
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> On our way out the woman spoke to me in German (our visit had been conducted in English), and asked about the rest of our family. I replied in her native tongue that my father died in a concentration camp and then added in English: 'That is another story—not a story for today."
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> This visit was a true highlight of our week in Germany.[9]

9. Molly Blatt, "*Rohrbacherstrasse* 77A," typescript, 2 December 2001; Molly refers here to Gurs as a concentration camp, but in fact it was a prison camp. I hesitated correcting her in this essay in this context, even here in the footnote, but felt that accuracy with the terminology is important. The concentration camps were in the east and were much larger in scale and featured forced labor and/or mass extermination. Both Molly and I learned a great deal more about Gurs in preparing for this trip and during our week in Heidelberg than we had known before. I'm sure that it was too painful an episode in family history for Molly to want to research conditions in Gurs previously. Details are provided in the edited collection by Giovannini and Moraw referenced above that Molly read just before we arrived in Heidelberg. We also discussed Gurs with Moraw and several former Jewish citizens while in Heidelberg. Although

Indeed it was. My mother, Sabine, and I were all close to tears with a mixture of exhilaration and sorrow as we left Molly's former apartment building. We concluded our time together with Sabine with a very pleasant visit to a trail that Molly's family used to frequent in the 1930s—the *Philosophenweg* or Philosopher's Walk. This trail runs high along one side of the Neckar River and offers a breathtaking view of the river and city.

That evening was the grand finale event of our stay in Heidelberg—a dinner in an ornate historic structure, the Festival Hall. There were dozens of servers, wine and champagne, several courses to the meal. It felt like a White House state dinner, where we were the guests of honor. One of the banquet speakers was a representative from the Jewish National Fund who accepted a gift of funds to plant 214 trees in Israel in honor of the 214 Heidelberg Jews who perished in Gurs. The city of Rehovot in Israel and Heidelberg have established a sister city relationship. This is part of a larger trend. The *New York Times* reports that "Germany has become Israel's most important ally outside the United States, providing critical support in the military, intelligence, political and economic fields."[10] However, "this rapprochement—not widely advertised, but continually growing—has largely eluded the relationship between Germany and American Jews," the article continues. This was my first trip to Germany, and prior to this visit, I had always felt a vague uneasiness about Germany and Germans. My distrust has certainly dissipated as a result of this trip. However, this sentiment, and an even stronger antipathy, is shared by many American Jews, and for good reasons. Several years ago, I co-authored a book on draft resistance in Israel and have long held the view that Israel and the Israeli-Jewish people will never be truly safe until the Palestinians attain social justice. While still holding this basic view, I must observe that the history of the Zionist movement and Israel take on an entirely different cast in the context of participating in a week in Heidelberg with its former Jewish citizens, many of whom are now Israeli citizens.

Mayor Weber delivered a farewell address to our group. She began by saying:

> In view of what happened in New York and Washington, D.C., last Tuesday, it is not easy for me to speak to you today, because I originally wanted to look back on a week full of joyful reminiscence and meetings with friends. The incredibly cruel attacks leave us helpless, and make our daily routine, our appointments, appear less significant. . . . Despite all these events, I am very happy that all of you managed to visit us in Heidelberg. I am glad that you were already here at the time of the attacks.

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not a concentration camp, conditions were brutally harsh with wood shutter windows that let in plenty of cold air, poor quality food and very little of it, inadequate clothing, and other hardships.

10. Roger Cohen, "Israel's Ties With Germany Elude U.S. Jews," *New York Times*, 4 March 2001.

Molly Blatt and Martin Blatt in Heidelberg. (Photo courtesy of the author)

> . . . This was meant to be a serious week, and beautiful, but we did not know it would be so serious. . . . I really hope that despite the terrible experiences of the week, and the terrible memories, that this week will remain in our memories as a special experience for all of us. We all have a common history. We in Heidelberg will never forget Auschwitz.[11]

11. Farewell speech by Mayor Beate Weber, 15 September 2001, translation provided by city of Heidelberg, and author's notes.

I believe that every one of us in that ornate hall was deeply moved by the mayor's words and that we all trusted in the sincerity of her declaration.

During the banquet, an *a cappella* singing group of Heidelberg men performed local Heidelberg historic songs. I sat and watched Molly and her childhood friend Ilse sitting together and listening to such songs as "Old Heidelberg, You Fine City." In the midst of the 9/11 madness and their own intense memories of Nazi cruelty, they were transported by this music into a reverie of happiness and contentment. I felt so pleased that they could share this moment together. But I was also saddened that they had been cheated out of so much by the Nazi regime. Their childhoods had been torn asunder and they were forced to flee, leaving each other and such warm, melodic, sentimental songs far behind. Here they were, reunited at last, but at eighty-one years of age, in the twilight of their years.

The banquet ended after midnight, and we boarded our buses for one more trip to the hotel. One of the lovely guides who had assisted and accompanied us all week was Karen, a graduate student studying Japanese at the University of Heidelberg. We were all a bit tipsy from the flowing wine at the banquet. Karen got on the bus public address system and told us that she wished to address us one more time. She thanked us for the extraordinary experience of spending a week together and then she said the following:

> I can't understand how people—in the name of God—can commit such horrors as the World Trade Center [attack]. And there is the horror of what the Nazis did in this country. But I hope that our week together shows that there are many of us here in Germany who reject such hatred and violence. I wish for peace—that we all can live together—as we just have one earth. I hope that the politicians of the United States have the wisdom to see that justice should be brought to those who committed these crimes but that they should not bring great harm to many innocent people. Shalom.

I can tell you that Karen was weeping, my mother and I had tears in our eyes, and I suspect that most in the bus that night did as well. Then the bus driver, who had accompanied us during the week, requested the microphone and proceeded to recite beautifully from memory a poem in German which spoke of doing good while we are on earth because it will be too late to go back and change things after death.[12] Thus concluded our final evening in Germany.

Although I thought that the organizers lost out on the opportunity to maximize exchanges between the former Jewish citizens and Germans, overall I strongly commend the efforts of the Germans of Heidelberg who made this week possible. This would have been a difficult program to manage and coordinate under any circumstances. That it took place in the week of September 11, 2001, made it much more of a challenge. The staff and guides were wonderfully helpful, kind, and resourceful. The city even

12. Karen's comments, 15 September 2001, author's notes; Molly Blatt and other former Jewish citizens translated the gist of the poem for me.

offered to cover any added lodging costs for those stranded by the consequences of 9/11. My mother and I got frustrated with the technology of long distance calling cards but still wanted to speak daily with my wife back home in Cambridge, Massachusetts, so we direct dialed, and the city never sent us the bill. Our many meals together in some of the finest establishments in Heidelberg, the boat trip on the Neckar River, and our excursion to the wine region were great fun, offering us the chance to sight-see and shop, and provided many contexts for the former Jewish citizens and the rest of us in the group to socialize and intermingle, which was critically important. The excellent treatment we received clearly communicated to us that nothing was too good for this group. Perhaps, given the history, that was indeed the correct approach for this one week.

This week in Heidelberg would have been emotionally charged under any circumstances, but 9/11 added a whole new level of intensity. Instead of relaxing at different points in the week when there was the opportunity to do so, Molly and I watched CNN (the only English-language coverage available to us) and speculated nervously about what would happen next in the world. We had no certainty as to when we would be able to depart from Germany, and that was a constant source of worry. We were very lucky to get a flight on our scheduled departure date.

I regard this week in Heidelberg as one of the most memorable experiences in my life. I could now envision all of the family stories and history in the actual places in which they occurred. I appreciated the interchanges with the former Jewish citizens and their companions in our group. It was a privilege and a pleasure to experience Heidelberg with my mother, and she and I, who have been close for many years, grew closer after this week together. Although she was initially reluctant to attend and although we both started the week with healthy doses of skepticism, by the end of the week we agreed that we had been very impressed with the organizers of this program. My mother was very happy—able to reconnect with old friends, to see many old familiar places, and to share her complicated, strong feelings for Heidelberg with me.

As we sat on our flight back to the United States, Molly and I each wrote in the journals we had kept during the week and which helped inform this essay. I reflected on the complex relationship between memory and history that had been made palpable over the past week. My mother remembered the people and the places. My memory and consciousness, which had been based solely on her accounts and those of my maternal grandmother, had been transformed and enhanced by our visit. I also acknowledged with great satisfaction that the program organizers were not seeking forgiveness. Rather, they organized this program for two reasons: to benefit the former citizens and their companions, and to ensure that Germans would not forget their Nazi past.

I think it is critical that Germans never grow complacent or feel that the horror of the past can somehow be redeemed if enough such programs are

held or Holocaust memorials built. James Young has written: "Better a thousand years of Holocaust memorial competitions and exhibitions in Germany than any single 'final solution' to German's memorial problem." He argued that the debate itself, "perpetually unresolved amid ever-changing conditions," might be most important. To that end, I think it is vitally important for many German cities and towns to sponsor such programs as the one Heidelberg held in September, 2001. As those with direct lived experience of the Holocaust pass away, the time for such gatherings is right now. Of course, even when my mother's generation has passed from the scene, we will still wrestle with the meaning of the Holocaust and how it ought to be remembered. Then the challenge will be to come to terms with how a post-Holocaust generation will "remember" events that they never experienced directly. The post-Holocaust generation's landscape is "an unabashed terrain of memory, not of history, but no less worthy of exploration."[13] I offer this essay as part of that exploration.

13. Young, *At Memory's Edge*, 191, 1, and 3.