

Jews In Germany

Holocaust conference in Berlin shows progress, but raises European anti-Semitism alarm.

Dr. Charles Silow

Special to the Jewish News

Editor's Note: Dr. Charles Silow is director of the Program for Holocaust Survivors and Families a service of Jewish Senior Life. The following story chronicles his experience at the Conference of the World Federation of Jewish Child Survivors of the Holocaust and Descendants held Aug. 24-27 in Berlin, Germany. Of the more than 400 attendees, 15 were from Detroit.

It was with some ambivalence that I decided to travel to Berlin to attend the annual conference of the World Federation of Jewish Child Survivors of the Holocaust and Descendants (www.holocaustchild.org). I was curious to see what Germany was like today, “the Fatherland,” the land where Nazism and anti-Semitism took hold and spread like wildfire through Europe, destroying 6 million Jews, 1½ million children, in its path.

The millions meant the extermination of real people, the parents and families of so many child survivors, victims that also included my grandparents, aunts and cousins — this was reason for my ambivalence.

Coming to Berlin, I half expected to see Nazis marching in the streets. But this was 2014. What would Berlin really be like? Despite the Holocaust, the Jewish people have survived.

Before the conference began, I met with several good friends at our hotel in the former East Berlin. On Friday afternoon, we left the hotel to walk and encountered some *Stolpersteine*, or stumbling blocks, placed in the sidewalk. They are copper plates implanted in the sidewalks that mark the local areas where Jews were rounded up by the Nazis and sent to their deaths. There were also fuller explanations on nearby buildings of what happened to the Jews who lived there.

We also saw, imprinted on the steps of a subway station, the names of Jews who lived in the area, who had been killed by the Nazis.

It was impressive to me that Germany seemed to be coming to terms with its past.

On Shabbat, we walked to the New Synagogue, dedicated in 1866. After services, at the Kiddush, I spoke to several young Jews who were born and grew up in Berlin. They felt very comfortable in the city that is their home. Many were



Berlin's Holocaust Memorial



Child survivors: Detroiters Rene Lichtman, Stefanie Seltzer, Philadelphia, Daisy Miller, Los Angeles, and Steve Adler, Seattle.

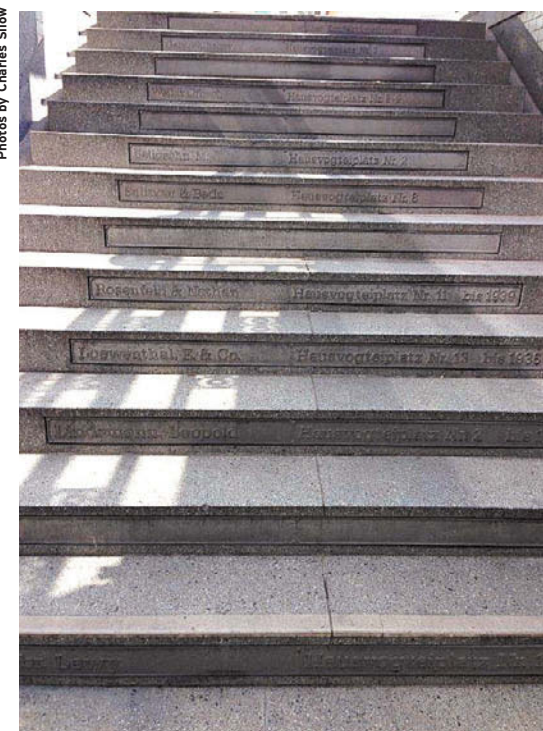
children of Russian Jews who had settled there; many were Israelis; many were converts to Judaism.

Overall, they also felt safe and supported by the German government. They had not, by and large, experienced any overt anti-Semitism in their lives. However, Jewish houses of worship and Jewish institutions are always protected by armed German police. It is highly admirable that the German government was protecting Jews, but it was also a commentary that Jews still needed to be protected.

Recent Changes

Now, with the recent war in Gaza, everything seemed to be dramatically changing. These young German Jews said that German media portrayed a biased, one-sided view of the war — Israeli tanks, destroyed buildings in Gaza and Arab children being harmed.

Many said that they now felt threatened as they saw how intense anti-Israel sentiments were turning into blatant anti-Semitism by Muslims and their sympathizers. They said they put their mezuzahs on the inside of their houses



Berlin subway steps list names of Jews killed nearby by the Nazis.

because they didn't want to show they were Jewish.

It was suggested that I wear a baseball cap, not a kippah, in public and that women should not display necklaces with a Jewish star.

Some friends at the conference decided to go kayaking on the river in Berlin. While they were kayaking, some Arab children threw rocks at them, lightly hitting one of them. The guide told them to forget about it, that they were kids just “playing Intifada.” They may not have even known that they were throwing rocks at Jews.

After Shabbat services, we walked to the Brandenburg Gate, site in the past of huge, frightening Nazi rallies. I did not see many older people, mostly young people. Even though this was a different time and, thankfully, a different era, I still felt the ghosts of the past.

The Holocaust memorial in Berlin, the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe, was not far from the Brandenburg Gate. It was a very powerful structure, and also a very powerful statement that it was built so close to the Brandenburg Gate.

From a distance, you see many pillars that appear to look like a large cemetery. As you get closer and walk through the pillars, you go downward. It feels as if you are descending into a forest of cement



Children of survivors: Mirka Gluck, Lodz, Poland; Detroiters Charles Silow and Mirka's sister, Bogna Rutkowska of Warsaw.

pillars, not knowing what lurks. When you emerge, there is a sense of relief that you are safe.

Below the memorial is a Holocaust museum. It was filled with people who were solemn, serious and seemingly moved by what they saw.

At The Conference

At the opening of the conference, a powerful and heartfelt speech was given by Klaus Wowereit, the governing mayor of Berlin. He recognized that Germany was where the murder of European Jews was planned and set into motion. He stated that Germans also inflicted unimaginable suffering on Jewish child survivors who endured the brutal murder of family members and friends.

Wowereit pledged that Berlin would never forget what Jews suffered in the Holocaust. He urged us to visit the memorials that commemorate the atrocities, the genocide that the National Socialists inflicted. He wanted us to know that the Jewish community of Berlin was growing and that Berlin had become an attractive place for Jews to live once again. He concluded by saying Jews are accepted and protected.

John Emerson, U.S. ambassador to Germany, and Yakov Hadas-Handelsman, Israeli ambassador to Germany, reiterated how Germany has changed and is sincere in its attitude toward Holocaust remembrance and caring about its Jewish population.

However, the new threat of anti-Israeli sentiment that is morphing into outright and blatant hatred for Jews was very disturbing to the conference attendees. Are we witnessing the budding of a new and malicious European anti-Semitism similar to that of the 1930s?

Dr. Andreas Nachama, a professor and rabbi, stated the next day in his plenary address that the Jews of Germany, of Europe, are uncertain of the future given the alarming rise of anti-Semitism. He stated Jewish life in Germany today is indeed vibrant, but that they are not sure about the



Child survivors: Detroiters Miriam Ferber and Barbara Lesowska, Lublin, Poland.

future. He said that, overall, German Jews feel they are "on thin ice."

He stated they recognize that in Nazi Germany the German people rapidly lost their democracy. Together today with the German government, they stand vigilant and united against the spread of anti-Semitism.

The growing anti-Israel and anti-Semitic sentiments seemed to be the proverbial 800-pound gorilla in the room. I spoke to several Israelis now in Berlin who said they felt like German Jews in the 1930s, unsupported by the general Jewish community.

At the conference, we heard interesting presentations from Holocaust educators and scholars. We also met in workshops for survivors, second and third generations as well as for all three generations.

We got to know and learn from one another. At night, we enjoyed wonderful klezmer music and danced together.

As the survivors, even the child survivors are getting older, we, the second and third generations, are working together with survivors and our Holocaust institutions to teach about the Holocaust and its moral lessons for future generations.

As Rabbi Tarfon in *Pirkei Avos*, Ethics of Our Fathers, stated, "The day is short, the labor vast, the toilers idle, the reward great, and the Master of the house is insistent." □



AJC DETROIT HONORS Gene Michalski

PLEASE JOIN US FOR THE AJC DETROIT
2014 Distinguished Leadership Award Dinner

Honoring
Gene Michalski

President & CEO, Beaumont Health

Thursday, October 23, 2014

Townsend Hotel, Birmingham, MI

5:30 PM Reception

6:30 PM Dinner

Guest Speaker*

Governor Rick Snyder

Dinner Chair

Nanci J. Rands

Individual tickets begin at \$250

Tribute Committee Levels begin at \$750

Please RSVP by October 16, 2014 at www.ajc.org/detmichalski

For additional information please contact AJC Detroit at
248.646.7686

*AJC is a tax-exempt organization and does not endorse or oppose any candidate for public office.

1953480

CARE House of Oakland County

Invites you to the



**CARE House
of Oakland County**

2014 CARE Night Charity Ball

Honoring Community Leader Mark Davidoff for his commitment to supporting the CARE House mission to prevent child abuse and neglect and protect children.



**Saturday, October 25, at 6 p.m.
The GM Heritage Center, Sterling Heights**

Evening also features vocal performance from Detroit Legend Thornetta Davis, dinner, live auction and dancing.

To purchase tickets, visit: www.carehouse.org or call **(248) 332-7173**

1948910