

A Journey of Remembrance and Hope --
The Way of Relationship and Reconciliation

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There are times when we are challenged to do something that we have never done before, challenged to let go of long held assumptions in the quest for wholeness. There are times when we are challenged to go to places we have never gone before, within ourselves and in the world. Wrestling through the night we awake to the morning light, limping as our ancestor Jacob did, carrying all of our uncertainty and struggle with us, knowing that we are called to go forward into the dawn.

I had nightmares in the months before the Journey. Sometimes I would wake up in a sweat. In the garbled speech of dreams, words desperate to form pounding on the gates of consciousness, the confusion that weighed on me in the waking hours of day played out in visions of the night. Survivors I have known came to me as emissaries and witnesses, most no longer of this world, reunited now with loved ones who did not survive. Some came with kindness, others with sadness, some with re-cremations, the unavoidable question heavy in the space between us, "how can you go?" Some simply stared at me from a distance, others looked at me gently, soothing, offering understanding and hope in their knowledge of who they knew me to be. I wanted to hug and to hold them all once again. I was terrified of losing their love, even across worlds, of violating the sacred trust that was the guarantor in the sharing of their stories. I couldn't look into Willy Jacobs' eyes the night he came, survivor of Auschwitz and five other camps. I could feel the heat of his gaze as he asked, "Don't you remember what I told you about that bloody land? The Autobahn, it's a Jewish cemetery. What about my brother, his memory be a blessing. He was shot when he collapsed on the Autobahn, when we were working as slaves. We were together the whole time until then."

But I also heard another voice that was Willie's, a gentler one, the one I needed to hear. I often travelled with Willie to visit schools on Vancouver Island in British Columbia, where he would share his story with students and tell them of the Holocaust in the first person. At the end of each talk, invariably a student would quietly speak from out of the stunned silence and ask him, "what do you want us to remember, what do you want us to tell our children?" Raising his hands as though in prayerful plea, the number 14382 bearing witness on his burly forearm, he would say so simply and quietly, "tell them not to hate, they shouldn't hate...."

In a strange way, it was Willie's gentler words that weighed more heavily upon me than his words of rebuke. Perhaps in the end, in some way needing his own release, that is what he intended in coming to me. Like many Jews, I have carried through my life a burden of unresolved anger, pain, and, I shudder to say, even hate toward Germany. I had grown up in a home into which it was forbidden to bring German products. My father was fierce in his rage against all things German, and, against Germans. A World War II veteran, having served in a hospital unit in Britain, fluent in German he also served as a translator during interrogations of German prisoners of war. Of very different temperament and life experience, I did not feel or need my father's rage. Though I came to understand where it came from, the nature of his anger repelled me, seeming to violate the very nature of remembrance and witness that we were called to bear. Surrounded by Yiddish and the ways of Eastern Europe among the older relatives, aware of those who had stayed behind from whom the letters stopped coming, my soul joined with theirs, I was deeply aware of what had been and was no more. Unlike my father, I carried my own pain quietly, bearing scars I could not understand, scars imprinted on the collective Jewish soul and psyche, scars carried and given voice by each one in their own way. I felt horror from my earliest years for what people are capable of doing to people. Turned to good, that horror became in no small part the impetus for life long social justice activism and peace-building, two strands of a quest for understanding and reconciliation among people.

For all of my commitment to fostering reconciliation, I had no desire or intention to ever visit Germany, continuing practically and symbolically in the way of my father never to buy German products, not to let Germany into my home or heart. Painfully aware of the inconsistency, at least when I could acknowledge it, Willie's gentle words coming to weigh on my heart, I had long ago allowed for the possibility of visiting Germany, but only for the sake of a greater purpose.

During the past year, I had to confront that greater purpose, to accept what it meant, and, in a moment of truth, to embrace it. The culmination of a deep and soul-searching process, I was part of a group this summer of twelve Boston area rabbis who travelled to Germany at the invitation of the German government to participate in a "Journey of Remembrance and Hope." The process began almost a year ago, when the German Consul General in Boston asked to meet with the Executive Committee of the Mass Board of Rabbis, on which I serve, and to offer a proposal. Only in part due to a scheduling conflict, I did not attend the first meeting. I did attend the second meeting, though with no intention of participating either in the discussion or the proposed trip, whose focus was to be, "Jewish Life in Germany Today." In spite of myself, I suggested that the focus was too limited, avoiding what most needed to be addressed. Realizing how much was churning within me following that meeting, I wrote a letter to the Consulate in which I addressed that avoidance. I urged that greater depth be given to the tour, suggesting that only by directly engaging with the painful legacies of the past could we create a path to the future.

Turning it back to us, I was startled by the response from the Consul General, "you design the trip and let's make it happen." Taking a deep breath, I knew then that I was committed, that this was the greater purpose I had waited for. As part of the planning committee for what I cannot refer to as a "trip," but only a "journey," I came to know Mr. Ralf Horlemann as a friend willing to reach across the divide and go to the difficult places. Reconciliation begins in relationship, and only in relationship is reconciliation possible. We shared with deep honesty and openness, the planning becoming part of the Journey. Through a rare depth of compassion and courage, Ralf made it possible to do something I had never imagined doing. I told him of my father, of how much I wanted to tell him of the journey but could not. I told him of the survivors and my fear of dishonoring them, of the challenge of letting go of long held and comforting assumptions. In opening up to Ralf and through him to the Germany of today, I knew that I needed to hold Six Million souls with no diminishment of longing and love. Wary of equivalence, I began to ask him of his burdens, of the legacy that he carried and how he wove it into his life. He told me of his father, conscripted into the German army when he was nineteen at the start of the war. Taken prisoner on the Russian front, his father remained in Russia for thirteen years, not returning to Germany until well after the war had ended, then eager to marry and start a family, to put aside and forget all that had been. One generation's effort to forget would later become the great abyss between itself and the next generation, the shattering of families with which Ralf's path as a diplomat and healer begins. There was more, but only to be shared as trust grew. At one meeting, one of the rabbis used the word "blitz" in regard to sending out information. Ralf cringed and shared how hard it is for him to hear that simple word. Much later, in the most painful place of the Journey, he said the same of the word "disinfectant," the abuse of language reminding of the abuse of people. We were learning the weight of each other's burdens and what it means to help carry them.

Learning to help carry each other's burdens is central to the way of reconciliation. Deeper than the elusive way of forgiveness, it is not about putting aside and forgetting, but about remembering and carrying together. Reconciliation through relationship and the sharing of legacies became a central theme and dynamic for me in preparing for and in making the Journey. Through its prefix, re-conciliation is about return, return to relationship, the goal and way becoming as one. It is the dynamic of *t'shuva*, hallmark of this season, turning toward and returning to each other. *T'shuva* that allows for change is rooted in a deep accounting of the soul called *cheshbon ha'nefesh*, an acknowledgement of responsibility that rises from the depths toward a new way of being, as for an individual, so for a nation. Seeking reconciliation with Germans and the Germany of today cannot be about forgiveness, which leads to forgetting, but about something deeper and of greater power to heal. Bringing all that we carry with us, the challenge and way of reconciliation is to remember together, memory becoming its own bridge. Seeking reconciliation through relationship is the beginning and way of A Journey of Remembrance and Hope.

The Journey began at the place of greatest pain, at Dachau. Weary and weeping, we made our way past the various religious memorials at the edge of the camp. Gathered at the Jewish memorial site, Rabbi Joseph Polak led Kel Molei Rachamim.

A child survivor, one of the youngest, imprisoned first as an infant at the Dutch transit camp Westerbork and then at Bergen Belsen, his presence among us was at each step of the Journey, for ourselves and our hosts, a witness to both the horror and the hope. Of burdens shared and carried together, in a moment that joined all of us as one, with Ralf and with each other, Ralf thanked us for allowing him to be part of what was our *Yizkor* service, to be included among Jews, "as one who comes from the country of the perpetrators."

(I wandered alone then, as each of us took time by ourselves, each with our own burdens. I struggled with what it means to go on from that place. Following our visit to Dachau, it rained most of the next day. The rain would do what I could not bring myself to do. I had never cleaned off the dust of Dachau that had caked onto my shoes the previous day. I couldn't bring myself to remove that dust, not wanting my shoes to ever be cleansed of their encounter with that place. I did not want to clean my shoes, did not want to remove the residue of that earth of sand and ash, of blood and tears, sodden and dry, too fertile and ever fallow. I preferred for the dust to remain, carrying it as seeds of remembrance and hope, grains of sand to shake loose over time, left wherever our journey took us. Here and there a grain of remembrance, a sigh of connection, seeds of remembrance left on the sidewalk or in a café, on fine carpets or on the stairs of a bus, as another tear at a memorial site, wherever we were a link to what happened. The rain began the process I could not begin myself, cleansing rain that cleaned my shoes, God's tears that had begun to fall after I placed a stone at the ovens and stepped outside, *mayyim chayyim/waters of life*.)

Remembrance and hope became entwined as we made our way, seeds of hope in the midst of remembering, in the ways and places of remembering, among the people with whom we remembered, the way of reconciliation emerging through relationship. Of that which gave ease and comfort to Ralf in carrying his burden, so we offered our hands and hearts, making our way as on a pilgrimage to Ludwig Maximilians University in Munich, where he had been a student. We came to visit the memorial to the White Rose, a student resistance movement to Hitler (his name be blotted out), their leaflets under glass among the cobblestones where we entered the main building. The shimmering image of a white rose is projected in perpetuity upon the marble walls inside, reminding all who enter of the sacred duty to resist evil, that learning and culture are meant to serve humanity, not destroy it. The brightest petals in the White Rose were two of its founders, a sister and brother who had dropped leaflets from the balcony above us on a January night in 1943. Calling on Germans to resist, warning of what was happening to Jews, on the following day Sophie and Hans Scholl were arrested and executed. The graduate school of government where Ralf prepared for his career as a diplomat is named for them, their memory a precious strand of light in the weave of his legacies.

Whether the simple display of the leaflets of the White Rose, or the Stolpersteine, the "Stumbling Stones" set into the sidewalks of Berlin that mark the last homes of deported Jews, or the acres of stone steles that form Berlin's "Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe," reminders of what happened are everywhere, set in stone and consciousness. I found a certain comfort in the ready awareness and

immediacy of the Holocaust, its daily presence felt amidst the bustle and details of quotidian life. In the beer halls and dance halls there was counter balance. In a courtyard that housed an artists' quarter, whose stone walls reverberated with Holocaust echoes, graffiti reminded passersby, "It's time to dance."

I found it hard to dance. Ralf insisted I come out for beer one night and said it was good to see me smile. I cried through much of the week. There were times it made sense to cry and times it didn't. I tried to understand why the tears flowed in those times when it didn't make sense. I came to realize that my tears were needed to lubricate the tectonic plates of my soul, helping to avoid a cataclysm as foundational attitudes shifted. The depth of the *cheshbon ha'nefesh* around me was palpable, that accounting of the soul with which the turning of *t'shuva* begins. I needed to open my heart to acknowledge what my eyes were seeing and my ears were hearing. More than memorials, it is people who offer the possibility of relationship, the seedbed of reconciliation.

We were welcomed to the Ruth Cohn High School by its principal, Ms. Andreja Orsag. From Croatia, a German ally in the war, her grandfather was a resistance fighter executed by the Nazis. Gathered in a large circle with teachers and students, the words "Welcome to Our School!" on the board behind us, there was a simple vase in the middle of the circle containing yellow and red roses, reminding me nevertheless. Of some forty national backgrounds, the students are not much younger than Sophie and Hans were then. The school approaches in the way of mission its effort to inoculate students against racism and anti-Semitism, teaching students to respond to all attacks on human dignity. The school draws on the work of its namesake, a Berlin Jewish woman who fled the Nazis and returned late in life, who developed a curricular approach called "Theme Centered Interaction," as a way of nonviolent communication. So through relationship, the way of reconciliation.

From classrooms to government ministries, each stopping point in the sweep of our encounters offered new teachings in the nature of relationship and its possibilities, whether between individuals or nations. In a meeting at the Federal Chancellery with a high government official, I asked: What do you see as the lessons that Germany has learned from its own history regarding the nature of such tensions as power and strength, nationalism and militarism, identity and otherness that all nations need to learn if there is ever to be a more just and peaceful world? The answer was disarming in its openness, reflecting in essence a way of national *cheshbon ha'nefesh*: "Most important has been the necessity to look frankly at ourselves. We have had no choice but to look so honestly because of our crimes. Without that extreme past, we would probably not look so honestly at ourselves either. Because we are responding to our own history, we may not be a model for others. It is essential to foster the plurality of society...." I thought to myself that there is indeed a lesson and a model in the ability of a nation to look so honestly at itself and to do such an accounting of its soul. I imagined what it would mean if the United States finally had the courage to do such an accounting and thereby acknowledge the genocide wrought on indigenous peoples and the moral blight of slavery's still bleeding wound.

As *cheshbon ha'nefesh* represents inner work not yet manifest in the outer world, *t'shuva* is the action that flows from the depths of such accounting. With images seared into our consciousness of Jews desperately seeking refuge from the deadly

reach of this land of our journey, we visited the refugee center in Reinickendorf on the outskirts of Berlin. In 2015, Germany accepted more than a million refugees. Sitting in a circle around a large table, we listened to one of those refugees, recently arrived with his wife and three children from Aleppo. On the table before us were children's drawings of welcome, a bright yellow smiling sun, colors unbound flowing freely into each other, a butterfly formed by paint prints of a child's hands. I thought of a child's poem from Tereisenstadt, "I Never Saw Another Butterfly." Mr. Masri told of the harrowing journey, of crossing a sea that didn't part, of border crossings, arrests and beatings. Speaking in Arabic that was translated into German that was translated into English, a group of American rabbis was joined with a Syrian Muslim man heart to heart by a common language of soul and psyche.

With all the scars of soul and psyche that are ours, as the wound upon Jacob's thigh, I return to the beginning, but it is different from when I left, from where I began. Still to hold and to carry, the burdens are lighter now for the sharing, the way of relationship and reconciliation. There are times when we are challenged to do something that we have never done before, challenged to let go of long held assumptions in the quest for wholeness. There are times when we are challenged to go to places we have never gone before, within ourselves and in the world. At the airport, at the end of a Journey that was just beginning, I suddenly told Ralf that I needed to buy something for my wife. Guiding me on the way, he understood..., my home growing up, my father, my own aversion. I went into the store by myself and purchased a small white porcelain cup, its edges ringed in gold. The cup is decorated in classic German style with two small children heavily dressed for the journey. A boy and a girl, he has a knapsack on his back, a walking stick in his hand, a floppy hat on his head with a flower in the brim. She is wearing a rough-spun dress, a large sack in her hand, a kerchief on her head, flowers tucked under her arm. Walking hand in hand, a bird singing from a branch as they pass, they are Hansel and Gretel on their own journey of remembrance and hope.

Upon returning, dad was aware that he hadn't seen me for some time and asked where I had been. As much as I had planned to avoid telling him, the words poured out. With eyes wide, at several points uttering the word "wow, dad listened as I told him in great detail of the Journey, of Ralf, the sense of greater purpose, of the young people, of the memorials. Generations and guilt flowing together, dad asked with the intensity of a plea, "do they recognize what they did?" "Did you see signs of the Nazis?" I told him gently of Dachau, and we both cried. Dad leaned back and said with fervor, "I still couldn't go there." Taking a deep breath, and using language that is mine and not his, I said, "dad, I need your blessing on my trip to Germany." Quietly pausing, clearly feeling the power of the moment, roles of father and son renewed as in days of old, he reached his arm out to take my hand. Through tears, dad said to me, "I'm proud of you."

Feeling as their child too, I pray that the survivors I have known and loved might feel the same, legacies held in sacred memory, even more when gathered in *Yizkor* with "one who comes from the country of the perpetrators." As I wanted to leave the dust on my shoes, I have wanted to hold the pure emotion felt at Dachau, to hold it in all of its pain and release, never to let go of those for whom I cried, to feel the catharsis of hot tears streaming down my face. It is the feeling of not wanting to

leave *Shiva*, to go out from the house of mourning, wanting to remain close in time and place to the dead. But we have to go on. We get up and go outside, squinting in the light, realizing that somehow there still is light, light beyond the flickering glow of the memorial candle. We take the first steps to go on with the journey of life, letting the rain wash away the dust of the cemetery from our shoes. We continue on the path of life as a journey of remembrance and hope.