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CHRISTIAN AND JEW IN EAST GERMANY

by Leonard Swidler

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There were 500,000 Jews living in Germany before the Nazis took over in 1933; today, in East Germany, out of a population of 17,000,000, there are 450 practicing Jews—and no Rabbi. Still, a small but growing number of Christians—theologians, clergy and lay people—are more and more coming to feel the need to be in dialogue with Jews. Partly this is because of a growing awareness of the past guilt and present responsibility for the horror of the Holocaust, and partly because of the swelling awareness among Christians in general of the need to enter into interreligious dialogue, and first of all into Jewish-Christian dialogue. There is of course precious little opportunity for East Germans to travel to the West, but the great majority of them can, and do, receive Western television broadcasts. Hence, for example, they were able to see the television production of "Holocaust" a few years ago, and in the spring of 1986 the television production of "Shoah."

But who can be the dialogue partners of these interested Christians in East Germany? There is no one other than this tiny handful of Jewish laity. In fact, the Christian community has reached out to them in dialogue, but the scholarly, theological levels of the dialogue are beyond the reach of the Jewish community.

It is against this backdrop of need that a second Seminar on Jewish-Christian Dialogue sponsored by the Journal of Ecumenical Studies and the Religion Department of Temple University went to East Germany for two weeks of intense dialogues (March 7-23, 1986). The team that went was made up of seven persons, four Jews and three Christians.
There were two Rabbis, one Jewish layman and one Jewish laywoman, a Catholic priest, a Catholic layman, and a Protestant laywoman, all of whom were trained scholars in various fields of religious studies. All were from the Philadelphia area, most from the faculty or graduate student body of Temple University Religion Department, one from the University of Pennsylvania, and one from the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College.

During these fifteen days in Germany (the beginning and closing weekends in West Berlin, and the rest of the time in East Germany) dialogues were held at a dozen different institutions. The welcome accorded us was warm, at times even touching. It often seemed that our hosts felt they could not do enough for us. We seemed to go from peak experience to peak experience, though at times individuals of our Seminar experienced personal "valleys." For instance, one member was Suzanne Heschel, whose father, Rabbi Abraham Heschel, one of the most revered Jewish scholars of the middle twentieth century, did his Ph.D. in the University of Berlin in 1933. His doctoral dissertation is still sitting on the shelves of the university library today. Visiting that university (and later lecturing there), with the memory of Rabbi Heschel's deportation from Germany by the Nazis, his later escape, and the loss of much of his family in the Holocaust, was a deeply emotional experience for Suzanne Heschel—and also for all of us, both Americans and Germans who were with her.

One of the other members of our seminar, Rabbi Mordechai Liebling, is the only child of two Holocaust survivors. For him, too, the coming to Germany was a searing emotional experience. But it was also the beginning of a deeply healing experience. In fact, even before his return to the United States, Rabbi Liebling began to think about the possibility of gathering a group of children of Holocaust survivors to make an extended visit to Germany, both West and East, to begin to build the bridge of future dialogue and collaboration to help rid the world of all future prejudice and fear of holocausts.

If nothing else but these two experiences had come from this Seminar, the whole project would have been more than justified. However, much more happened on a wide variety of levels:
Our first weekend was devoted to putting on a conference on Jewish-Christian dialogue in West Berlin, co-sponsored by the Protestant and Catholic Academies, the church-supported conference centers. That conference reached its high point and conclusion in a joint Protestant-Catholic-Jewish worship service on Sunday morning in a West Berlin Protestant church. The service had been worked out jointly by Protestant, Catholic and Jewish participants in the conference. Its center was the sermon preached by Rabbi Mordechai Leibling. He spoke of how "We Jews and Germans must work together to tell the world, from our experience as victim and victimizer, that we cannot afford to stand by benumbed in the face of the possibility, and perhaps even likelihood, of other holocausts' occurring, especially the worst of all possible holocausts, a nuclear war." Standing by his side, translating for him into German, was a Protestant theological student, Katherine Koppe, who had spent a year as an exchange student in the Temple University Religion Department and who is now back finishing her theological studies in West Berlin.

On Monday morning, March 10, we walked across the border into East Berlin, a somewhat unnerving experience for those who had never done it before. But, once across, we were warmly welcomed by Professor Heinrich Fink, the Dean of the Protestant Theological Faculty of the Humboldt University in East Berlin. After getting settled in our quarters, seeing the University and laying out our schedule for the rest of the week, we made our first formal presentation in East Berlin that night at the Protestant Church of Sancta Sophia (Sophienkirche), where a grass-roots Jewish-Christian dialogue group had gathered. There were over 200 people jammed into the hall, with the last twenty standing around the edges. The first part of the evening was very serious, with Gerard Sloyan and Lester Dean conducting a Christian-Jewish dialogue on Paul.

This was very high-level, creative, theological thinking that was going on. Their initial statements were written out and translated into German ahead of time, but once they were presented, the real dialogue, asking questions and responding back and forth, began in earnest. New thoughts were thought. The edges of knowledge were pushed out. This dialogue was the real thing! Despite the fact that this was done at the
highest scholarly and intellectual level, and despite the fact that it was done in English and then translated into German by two other members of our seminar, the audience was totally transfixed. And we had similar experiences the several other times that variations of the "Paul" dialogue were conducted the next two weeks of our sojourn in East Germany, whether the audience was largely lay, seminarians, or theological professors. Each time new ideas were created.

On the following day, Tuesday, March 11, we divided our forces, with some going to speak to senior-high-school-level women students, and others of us meeting with a group of Catholic leaders, chaired by Bishop Bernhard Huhn, the Bishop of Görlitz, which is on the East German-Polish border; he is also in charge of ecumenical affairs for the East German Bishops Conference. The exchange was extremely open and warm. Afterwards Bishop Huhn commented that this was the first time that he had sat around the table with a Jew (a comment that we were to hear many times in the ensuing days), and sincerely hoped that this would be only the first Jewish-Christian dialogue that we would be involved in together.

During the day on Wednesday and Thursday we were intensely involved in scholarly dialogues with students and faculty of the Protestant Theological faculty of the Humboldt University in East Berlin. It was they, through the leadership of Professor Fink, who issued the formal invitation to us and through whom the necessary permissions and visas were acquired which made the entire trip possible. We also were extremely warmly received by the pro-rector, or vice president, of the university within whose area of responsibility the theological faculties lie.

We also renewed our very positive relations with the Protestant church-supported seminary in East Berlin, the Sprachenkonvikt, where we had spent four delightful days in a similar seminar in 1984. This time, since their seminary was just beginning its semester, we had dinner and only a single full evening of dialogues. As before, the students turned out almost in toto and with great enthusiasm.

In some ways, the high point of our first week which was spent entirely in East Berlin came that following weekend when we put on a very intense, packed conference at the Protestant Academy in East
Berlin. There were 300 participants! It seemed that we were talking from early morning to late at night, and when we were not in formal session each of us was surrounded by groups of Germans who wanted to continue the discussions in a wide variety of directions. Besides individual lectures, we put on three planned Jewish-Christian dialogues, namely, the one on Paul, another one on Jesus, and a third one on feminism and religion. The one on Jesus was conducted by Rabbi Lewis Eron and Leonard Swidler, with the one on feminism and religion being done by Suzanne Heschel and Katherina von Kellenbach. Although it was late at night and everyone was told that those who felt they needed to leave in order to get home at a reasonable hour should feel free to leave immediately, all of the 300 persons stayed for the closing Protestant-Catholic-Jewish prayer service on Saturday evening. It included the lighting of candles and the singing of Hebrew prayers and songs, the recitation of Protestant prayers and German Bible reading, and the chanting in Latin of the Catholic night prayer, Compline.

On Monday, March 17, we began our second week in East Germany with a train ride south of Berlin through central Germany to the medieval town of Erfurt which contains the Augustinian monastery where Martin Luther first joined a religious order, became a Catholic priest and taught theology. Although we visited all those important historical sights, the reason why we were going to Erfurt was to conduct dialogues with the faculty and student body of the sole Catholic philosophical-theological seminary which trained Catholic priests for all East Germany. We all agreed that in many ways Erfurt was the high point of our whole trip. To begin with, it was a continuation of our meeting with Catholics which occurred the first week in Berlin with Bishop Huhn and his colleagues. I had not been able to arrange for dialogues with Catholics on our previous seminar trip in 1984, and so the warm response by Catholics this time was especially gratifying.

We stayed at a thirteenth-century Catholic convent run by Ursuline nuns in the center of the city. After having been banqueted and led on sightseeing tours by the rector of the seminary, Father Johannes Friemel, and his colleague Father Joseph Reindl, Professor of Hebrew Bible, we were told by the rector that a few of his colleagues were
invited to meet with us that first evening. Hence, we expected an intimate, social gathering of a few professors. What in fact occurred was a gathering of practically all the present faculty members of the theological seminary, plus most of the emeritus faculty—about twenty of them. We all sat around a large table in easy chairs drinking wine and engaged in a free-wheeling, intense, sympathetic, open Jewish-Christian dialogue for several hours. Sometimes there were reminiscences by the priests about Jewish school chums, some of whom died later in the Holocaust, and some of whom escaped and whom they met again after the war. But, most of the time, the dialogue was on a very high scholarly and at the same time intensely personal level (their faculty includes a number of world-known theological scholars, in some instances priests from West Germany who decided years back to give up the freedom and security of the West to offer their badly needed scholarly and pastoral talents to the East German Catholic Church—about 1,300,000 Catholics).

The next morning we began what had been declared by the seminary faculty a "Dies Judaicus." All classes were dismissed, and the students and faculty were invited—not mandated—to attend any or all of our dialogues and lectures, which began at nine in the morning and ran until eleven that night, stopping only long enough to eat and to catch our breath. Looking at the large lecture hall in front of us with my trained crowd-surveying eye, I quickly realized that out of the 107 students (all of whom save four were candidates for the priesthood), about 115 were present! Presumably others heard about our visit and joined in.

The Germans are obviously used to absorbing lectures in large doses, but they clearly were not sitting there passively. One could see by the attentive look on their faces, their feverish note-taking, the questions in the brief question period after the lectures, and the thunderous and extended applause afterwards that their minds were intensely engaged. The day closed in the evening with a huge free-for-all question-and-discussion period, which after it broke up formally was followed by the encirclement of each of us by eager, questioning students and faculty. We obviously could have profitably spent several days of intense teaching and exchange there. In fact, we all were indi-
vi du al ly invited back by the rector and faculty to teach whenever we would like—it is an intriguing prospect.

After our two days in Erfurt we took the train to Leipzig. For those of us who had been to East Germany two years before, coming to Leipzig was like coming back home. We had spent a number of days there in 1984. This time we had only a day and a half. Our dialogues with the faculty and students of the Protestant Theological Seminary were on a much smaller scale than what we had experienced at Erfurt since the seminary was officially closed for the Fair. Nevertheless, the dialogues were intense and fruitful, often building on what we had begun two years before.

I also wish to recall a visit that Gerard Sloyan and I had with a number of the Catholic priests of the Oratory in Leipzig, where I had stayed when I was there two years before. All of the younger and middle-aged priests had studied at the Catholic Seminary at Erfurt and were now deeply involved in a wide range of pastoral work, which included social justice and ecological and peace issues. Gerry Sloyan and I agreed afterwards that we have rarely been together with a more vital group of Catholic priests. It was a most encouraging experience. We also had the additional benefit of hearing from one of the Oratory priests, who is also on the theological faculty at Erfurt, that from his direct knowledge the faculty and students at Erfurt were indeed extremely enthusiastic about our visits there. As veteran teachers, we have rarely experienced such intense, instant gratification from our teaching as we did on this trip.

Taking the train back to East Berlin and being met by Pastor Graupner of the Protestant Academy of East Berlin and Oberkirchenrat Tschoerner (the official of the Protestant Church in East Germany who, together with Professor Heinrich Fink of the Humbolt University Theological Faculty, arranged our whole trip this time, and who alone arranged our whole trip in 1984) met us at the train station. It was again another homecoming for us. We had a farewell dinner, during which time we assessed the impact of our trip and speculated about future possibilities, one of which was a warm encouragement by an editor of the St. Benno publishers of Leipzig—the only Catholic publishing house in
East Germany—-for the four of us who had developed the two Jewish-Christian dialogues, the ones on Jesus and on Paul, to put our dialogues together in publishable book form—with no absolute promises of course, given the vagaries of the East Germany bureaucracy. We intend to follow up on the encouragement.

One other recollection of our visit to Germany must also be recorded here, namely, that in all three cities, Berlin, Erfurt, and Leipzig, we also met with members of the surviving Jewish communities. They are tiny in number and shrinking, but nevertheless intensely committed to living as vigorous a Jewish life as possible, not in isolation but in openness and dialogue with their neighbors and visitors. Would that all religious communities were as committed and dialogic as these are. Would that these particular committed and dialogic religious communities had the replenishing resources of growing, young members rather than only older, dying ones. Nevertheless, their example is moving.

On Saturday afternoon we were at the Catholic Academy in West Berlin where we were hosted by its director, Laurence Ungruhe, and the director of the Protestant Academy, Franz von Hammerstein. Our first session was devoted to the presentation of a Jewish-Christian dialogue on religion and feminism, and the second session was devoted to reflections by each of our group on the two weeks' experiences in East Germany. The West Germans were intensely interested. The one criticism that was raised was that the next time we come we must spend more time in West Berlin.