

Germany's Responsibility

I do not know what the view out of your hall is, but I bet that on your way to Nuremberg you passed through lovely landscapes. If I were with you and saw the same landscapes, the beauty would not have escaped my eyes. And still, my mind and mouth cannot tie together the name Germany – or any of its regions - with the adjective Beautiful. 80 years after German bureaucrats and military obeyed orders and crammed my mother with dozens of others in a cattle wagon, and transported them to Bergen Belsen concentration and extermination camp - my ability to appreciate the innocent features of nature in Germany is forever hampered.

This is to say that I cannot pretend to be objective, when I speak of and in Germany. But please don't be mistaken and assume that I judge the Germans of today by the deeds of their grandparents or parents 80 years ago, though I admit that the question what one's family did during the third Reich always pops up.

Guilt should be attributed to those who directly participated in the acts of repression and persecution. Responsibility stems out of the fact that there is a generational continuity in a society: of families, of inherited property, of profits that were made and of wealth that was accumulated during the war, of institutions and infrastructure. There is continuity in the language spoken then and now, in the same mountains and lakes. Responsibility derives from the very fact that we are thinking creatures, who are able to be conscious of our history or histories. Responsibility is heading forward, to the future, and is based on the human potential of making a positive change.

As for the language. Please do not assume that when I hear German - I necessarily think of the language of the Nuremberg laws. In Bergen Belsen my mother – in an act of defiance - assembled the kids in her barracks and tried to engage them in some learning. She taught them poems of Heinrich Heine, or at least what she remembered. I don't know if it was in German or in the translation to Serbo-Croat, but years later she told me she wanted to make a point about the language. Perhaps it played a role that Heine was born Jewish, but I tend to believe that his radical criticism of capitalism and his friendship with Karl Marx were more significant for her. A year or two earlier, my father was incarcerated in a ghetto under the direct control of the Romanian fascist regime, that collaborated with Nazi Germany. This was in a

region occupied from the Soviet Union. He sometimes managed to escape the ghetto and work in an ex-kolhoz for some potato peels for his family. There, in the farm, he met a young German that told my father he had deserted from the Nazi army. True or not, this young man taught my father die Internationale, in German - a language my father had known already from school.

Neither of my parents was a Zionist. On the contrary, it was totally natural for them to think that Jews should live where they were born and where their families had been living for hundreds of years. They felt part of their societies. They thought that the idea of an exclusive Jewish state was ridiculous, and that this was not the way to fight anti semitic persecution. For them, socialism was the answer and solution.

If not for the very condensed period of 12 horror years of the 1000 years Reich - that drove Jews out of their homes and out of the world, they would have most certainly remained in their respective homelands: Yugoslavia and Romania.

When I was as young as 5 years old, I asked them how come they had emigrated to Israel, since they were not Zionists. Ours as you see was a very politicized home . The communist party was for me a substitute to the large family that I never had, because my grandparents and many of my uncles and aunts and their children, on my mother's side, had perished in Nazi occupied Europe. And in the communist party, even in Israel, and even for a little girl as I was, "zionist" had a negative connotation. I was old enough to ask that question. But I assume that my parents didn't think I was old enough to get an answer. Years later I discovered the answer by myself: when I started travelling in Europe, I could sense the void that was awaiting my parents and many other people who barely survived the extermination camps and returned to their homelands. The difference between their fate during the German occupation and the fate of others, who were not Jewish, was striking. I learned that in many countries the returning Jews were not welcome. "Why are you here, it is written that you had emigrated" - bureaucrats in various municipalities told the returning Jews: the German occupiers meticulously wrote in their records that emigration was the reason for their departure. My mother heard this question as well, in her beloved Yugoslavia. On the other hand, in the communist circles she was in, the idea of establishing a state for Jews was considered an imperialist plot. She was torn between the two messages. My father, in Romania, also a supporter of the Bolsheviks, heard people saying: go to Palestine. What are you doing here .

Both, separately, realizing how unwanted they still were, found physical refuge in a place which wanted them, after the establishment of the State. The enormity of the void pushed them out.

Both my parents were offered by the young State to share an apartment in Palestinian houses in Jerusalem: the owners of these houses were chased out or escaped during the 1948 war and not allowed to return. To my great relief, my parents - they still did not know each other - refused to live in houses of those anonymous refugees. They were not aware yet of the enormity of the Nakba, but they sensed it was wrong to accept the offer. As a refugee myself, my mother told me, I could not live in the house of other refugees. My father said he was sure it was only a matter of a few years before the Palestinian refugees be back. And yet - my parents – in spite of their professed ideology and their personal decision not to live in a house of refugees - were part of the typical trajectory of a settler colonial movement: an influx of foreign incomers to a country and builds up a totally new political entity from which the indigenous population is excluded and/or totally chased out. No matter what their motivations were, from the position of any Arab Palestinian, they were a foreign invader. Colonists.

If to remain on this personal track, Germany is responsible for the fact that my parents emigrated to Israel, and that I was born in this country. And that like hundreds of thousands of others we became colonizers.

You will correctly say that Zionism started long before Germany embarked upon the path of national socialism.

1. Indeed, Zionist thinking has developed since the late 19th century, in times when European settler colonialism and white entitlement were natural, almost unquestioned.
2. But while Zionism was part of these atmosphere and predispositions and convictions of European superiority, as a movement it was also a reaction to the other face of Euro-Christian superiority - that one addressed against the Jews.
3. Zionism's so called remedy to antisemitism ("a national home for Jews") was not adopted and accepted by the majority of Jews. On the contrary. They opted for many other solutions: socialist struggle and socialism, like my parents did, cultural autonomy and socialism like the Bund, assimilation, conversion, emigration to the US and other distant states when it was possible.

4. The combination of laws restricting emigration in the US and other countries in the mid 1920's and the genocidal anti-semitism that Nazi Germany produced - gave Zionism what it did not have before: wider support among Jewish communities and followers from within the decimated Jewish people – and later on from within Jewish communities in Arab and Muslim states. Originally, most of them did not opt for the Zionist way, but were treated by the respective states as unwanted fifth column of the new State of Israel, and were chased out or encouraged to leave.

The unleashing of this settler colonial process in full speed, in Palestine, is therefore directly connected to German track in the 30's and the 40's of the last century. Palestinians have been always saying, correctly, that “it was not our fault” that Europe persecuted the Jews to a point of genocide. But we are not talking about faults, or exoneration: we are talking about a historical sequence and the need to understand it. We cannot undo the past, but we must strive for an amendment.

Therefore, when German politicians say that their, your, country bears responsibility, I could not disagree. The problem is that the responsibility they are talking about is for the fate of the State of Israel. Not for the sanctity of life, not for the fate of human beings. There is a huge difference between a State, as an impersonal entity of Power, interests and institutionalized violence, and its people. Or more correctly: its two peoples: Jews and Palestinians.

By claiming responsibility for a State, German politicians fetishize it, the way fascism fetishizes states and places them above the citizens. By accepting the state of Israel as the only lawful representative of the murdered Jews and their families - Germany has erased the centrality of the diaspora in Jewish life, made Israel its substitute and actually minimized the enormous loss of this diaspora. By connecting Israel to Jews only - Germany practically erases the Palestinians who lived in that country (from the river to the sea) before the state was established, those who were expelled, those who are now citizens of the State and those who are subject to its harsh military rule.

By fetishizing the State of Israel, German politicians practically endorse and support its settler colonial aspects. This is being extremely and pathetically manifested by the way in which Germany persecutes and silences every voice that criticizes the state of Israel - including the voices of leftist Jews and Israelis.

30 years ago the Palestinians gave Israel a golden opportunity, to cut loose from its settler colonial traits in but 22% of historic Palestine : Gaza and the West Bank. For the sake of future generations, the PLO was prepared to have a state, alongside Israel, in these small parts. This was a moment when the two peoples could deviate together from a deterministic road of bloodshed and permanent military escalation. Instead, Israel only intensified the expansion of its colonies and the fragmentation of the Palestinian could-be-state territory. In their continuous unequivocal support for the State of Israel – Germany and other European governments practically encouraged it to pursue this violent way.

The internal logic of settler colonialism sees the indigenous group as redundant, disposable. For several decades both mainstream Palestinian political groups and leftist Israeli groups tried to break this internal logic. We tried to create space in which the two peoples live together, acknowledge the existence of each other while the underlying principle is that of equality. For this, we needed the help of the world. Sometimes we thought we had it – in UN resolutions, in some declarations and political initiatives. But it didn't work. Europe, the world, turned out to be totally unwilling to truly challenge Israeli violations of international law and accords. Israelis became more and more accustomed to the notion, that they can live normally while maintaining the abnormal situation of occupying and repressing the Palestinians. October 7 proved that what we - both Palestinians and leftists – had said for years was correct: this anomaly, this abnormal normalcy, cannot continue for ever.

Now, the status of the Palestinians in a settler colonial reality, as a redundant and disposable, unnecessary element, has reached a new peak, or a new abyss: it is hard for me to utter those words, but in these very days, in front of our very eyes, Israel is committing genocide in Gaza. Tens of thousands of people are being killed, entire families are being wiped out. All institutions of health and education, culture, commerce and industry- are being destroyed. The community there - that I knew personally and that is so dear to me - does not exist anymore. For more than 7 months 2.3 million - among whom many friends of mine - live in hell. Hell upon earth. People with connections, material resources, good professions and education and relatives abroad - have left for good or will leave. At the same time, in the west Bank, the Israeli authorities and violent settlers conduct another sort of war against Palestinians: economical war and further expulsions from their lands. More and more Israelis openly say that total expulsion of Palestinians from Gaza and from the West Bank is the “best solution”. Too many Israelis opt now for

a long war. And wars, as Germany should very well know, only lead to more disasters and dehumanization.

Palestinians' suffering is unimaginable. But Israelis are paying and will pay a very heavy price for engaging in such a war of annihilation that has transgressed all borders and imagination. Germany (and other European states that feel responsible after the holocaust) should have intervened in order to save Israel from its colonialist self. By not doing so, Germany betrays its proclaimed responsibility.

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