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«How does the Holocaust affect our lives 4 generations after?»

When did I hear about it for the first time?

Two years ago I did a service for peace with an organization called Action Reconciliation Service for Peace in the Holocaust Center in Russia and to present a report at an international Holocaust conference “The Holocaust: Remembrance and Prevention”, I started thinking. When did I hear about the Holocaust for the first time in my life? What was my reaction to it? I am pretty sure, that my first contact with the Holocaust was in 2004, I was 8 years old and my parents and I were on holiday in Amsterdam. When I look back it’s strange, that I had to come to the Netherlands to learn about the Holocaust. So my family and I went to the Anne Frank House and I heard about the Holocaust for the first time.

As I absolutely do not remember my reaction to all of this, I asked my parents and they said that I was quite interested.

How do we learn about it in school in Germany?

As I did some research and asked some of my friends, they mostly told me, that they heard of the Holocaust for the first time in school and at the age of about 10.

I think everyone knows that we hear about the Holocaust a lot in German schools. But I think what probably not so many people know is, **how** we are learning about the Holocaust in Germany. We aren’t just learning about it in history lessons. We are discussing it in nearly every subject: In English, in German, in biology, in music, and of course also in history lessons. E.g. we were analyzing speeches of Hitler or Goebbels in German lessons, or we were discussing lyrics and the role of music during the time of the war, in music lessons. It is part of the German school system, to deal with the Holocaust in different subjects, in different ways and the lessons are mostly thematically structured and not chronologically, because we focus more on the whole and not so much on the specific dates and battles. This is where the topic of the Holocaust is distinct from other history topics (which are taught chronologically and only treated in history lesson). And it’s very common to visit a historical place like concentration camps, memorials or museums within organized school trips. In my case, my classmates and I visited the concentration camp Theresienstadt near Prague. That’s a very effective way to make the students think about the Holocaust, because although there was not much more to see, than some old buildings, we all felt very bad after visiting Theresienstadt.

On the one hand, I would say it’s very important to teach this much about the Holocaust in school, especially in Germany. On the other hand, there are so many students, who are not interested in the Holocaust anymore, because we are talking about it in school so often (34% of the students in the age of 14 to 19 think they are dealing too much with the Holocaust in school¹).

When I talked about “learning about the Holocaust in school”, with some of my friends, I also often heard that they felt that the teacher expected them to feel bad. That is very common: 43% of students in Germany feel that their teachers expect them to show sadness about the Holocaust². I never had this feeling, but many of my friends told me they had. I am sure there is

no one happy about the Holocaust but when someone expects you to feel in a special way towards something, it often turns out, that the person feels different because of this expectation.

My interests

But I seem to be resilient, because I am still interested in the Holocaust and 69% of the 14 to 19 years-old Germans are as well³.

I am mostly interested in how something like the Holocaust could happen, how could normal people start killing others, what did they feel and think while doing it, how could they go on with their lives after the war, these are the main questions which bother me and not so much all the dates. But the more I read, think and watch about it, the less I understand this.

My feelings

It's pretty much myself who makes me feel responsible and sometimes guilty and ashamed for what the Germans did during the Holocaust. I never met someone who blamed me for being German or who blamed me for the Holocaust because I am German. But I am quite normal with these feelings in my generation in Germany. 59% of 14 to 19-year old Germans feel ashamed for what Germans did during the Holocaust⁴. (It is interesting that just 49% of Germans who belong to the age group of 20 to 44 and only 48 % of Germans who are 45 and older said that they were ashamed about it⁵).

My family

As I already said, I always was interested in the Holocaust, as well as in the history of my grandparents and their childhood in the war, but I never got the idea of asking about their parents, my great-grandparents. It was not that I was afraid of the truth, I barely knew them. I just never asked about it.

So when I prepared myself for doing a service for peace in Russia in the Holocaust Center I began to ask my dad about my great-grandparents, as my grandparents were not available at this time. My dad spoke about it very openly and told me that we don't know too much about them, but we know that my grandmother's father was anti-democratic and that he joined the Wehrmacht in 1934, that we don't know if he was in the party, but we were rather sure that he killed a lot of people and that he probably was involved in some war crimes, because he was part of the partisan war. So when I asked my grandparents about their parents I expected them to tell me some more details about this, but all they told me that there was nothing special to tell and that my great-grandparents were all just nominal participants of the war and of the national socialist policies (which is true on the one hand, because sadly it was nothing special to be a Nazi at that time, but on the other hand even if they were „innocent“, which I don't think, they did not do anything to stop the Holocaust but kept silent, which makes them guilty in parts as well, in my opinion).

This was a very interesting situation for me, to see how my parents' and my grandparents' generation deal with my family's past. Statistics demonstrate that my family is an example for German society. According to a survey 32% of young Germans between 14 and 19, 20% of Germans between 20 and 44 and only 16% older than 44 think that their family was not innocent in the time of National Socialism⁶.

Of course, it's because my grandmother was much closer to her father, than my dad and I were. But it also has something to do with the different times we were all raised in.

What does being German mean to me and my generation?

After coming back from Russia I thought a lot about Germans and Russians and the differences and similarities in cultures or societies. Before my time in Russia I could not define what being German meant to me. But after coming back I could look at German society from another point of view. To me being German means being part of a multi-ethnic, multicultural and multi-religious society that respects and appreciates the differences we all have, no matter if they exist because we have different cultural backgrounds or because we are all just individuals with different experiences of life.

The Connection of Being-German and the Holocaust

So I was asked if I think it's good or bad that being German is so closely connected to history and the Holocaust?! I cannot answer the question if it's good or bad, because it's just a fact. But is it effective or not? On the one hand, I think it's good that Germany faces up to its past and its responsibility, but on the other hand, the fear of doing something wrong or hurting someone concerning Jews, prohibits an approach of Jews and Germans or of their cultures. But I hope that will be changed by my generation or the next, the 5th post-war generation of Germans.

How present is the Holocaust in Germany today?

For me the Holocaust is very present, not just in school education or in the non-existing national pride. I think of the Holocaust at least twice a month. There are memorials for the Holocaust in Germany in nearly every city, there is art about the Holocaust e.g. the most famous German artist, Gerhard Richter, painted a collection of pictures called Birkenau in 2014 and there are new movies which deal with the topic of the Holocaust in the movie theatres always. And there are still trials against people who worked in concentration camps and killed thousands of people or at least helped killing them.

But I think the Holocaust is most present in politics. In my opinion German politics cannot be seen separated from German history, e.g. asylum law forms article 16a of the German Constitution: "Politisch Verfolgte genießen Asylrecht". This law was introduced in 1949 by a parliamentary council of which many members were people who had suffered under National Socialist policy or had opposed it. And still today we are very careful towards right wing politics and racism in Germany, although a right-wing party got 12.6 % of the votes in the last election.

Also in these days there is a change in how present the Holocaust is, because the contemporary witnesses are passing away and in some years they all will be gone. This is why my generation has to find another way of remembrance and commemoration which is going to be a challenge and a chance at the same time.