History Depends on Where You Stand: A Talk and Reading

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November 1, 2021

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I've crossed Pennsylvania on the Turnpike many times, but never have I turned north on the winding road through the forest that leads here on a drive that reminds me of going to my father's village in the Schwarzwald in Germany. Somehow the dense trees, the rolling hills, the homes nestled into them, gives me a similar feeling. The village is called Rexingen and I've written about it twice over many years. First, I penned a memoir called *Good Neighbors, Bad Times: Echoes of My Father's German Village;* and ten years later I wrote *Good Neighbors, Bad Times Revisited*: *New Echoes of My Father's German Village.* Both are part of one journey to understand the meaning of "a good neighbor" before, during, and after Nazi times—and how that connects to me, trying to be a good neighbor now in New Jersey. That question seems particularly relevant because the politics of hate that thrived under Hitler in the 1930s is among us again today.[1]

I entitled my talk tonight "History Depends on Where You Stand" because the people I spoke to and the stories I heard gave me perspectives I did not find in history books. They are stories of ordinary people remembering their lives as Christian and Jewish neighbors under the pressure of state-sponsored hatred. I focused on villagers who remembered each other as decent people, struggling to remain decent with varying degrees of effort and success (rather than on avid Nazis; enough has been written about them). What I realized from their individual stories, one after another, is that things are never as simple as they seem. My preconceived notions were challenged, my empathy grew, by listening to others not like myself—a lesson particularly applicable at a time when so many of us hide in our echo chambers. We talk to the people that we know, people who agree with us and affirm our beliefs without question, avoiding those we consider "The Other."

Allow me to offer a little background on this tiny village of 1,200 and what drew me to write two books about it. I'll include excerpts to take you along on my journey, while illustrating, I hope, the power of small stories to deepen our understanding of history—and why that matters.

Rexingen, as I said, is in the Schwarzwald, about sixty kilometers south of Stuttgart in Southwest Germany. My father was born there in 1898, a generation before the Nazi regime. What made this village unusual is that half the village was Jewish back then; the other half was Catholic, except for three or four Protestant families. Everybody knew everybody, often more than my father liked. As he often said to me: "If someone sneezed in one house, someone down the street would say 'Gesundheit." That was true for generations until, in the 1920s, many young people left for the big cities, my father included. After volunteering in the First World War at age seventeen, he moved to the city of Frankfurt until he fled Hitler's Germany in 1936, three years before World War II.

By then, only one-third of his village was Jewish, but that was more than in the surrounding villages. The Jews felt very welcome there, my father would say in Queens, New York, where I grew up. "In Rexingen we all got along." I heard that often paired with "In Rexingen, children knew how to behave!" and later, "In Rexingen girls did not wear lipstick." Frankly, I tuned out then, uninterested. "That's your world, not mine," I'd announce, committed to being 100% American. His village did not interest me.

Even so, the echo of my father's words, "In Rexingen we all got along," came back forty years later when I saw a rescued Torah from the village. Like every Torah around the world, it contains the Five Books of Moses that Jews in synagogues read yearly, starting with Genesis. This Torah was damaged during Kristallnacht when, in 1938, the Nazis decided to burn all the synagogues in Germany, but it survived and was mounted in a Memorial room of a village in Israel that was founded by a group of refugees from Hitler's Rexingen. The old man who took me around said that the Torah had been rescued, not by the Jews, but by their Christian neighbors. That got my attention because I grew up watching 1950s movies in which all Germans were Nazis and evil, so I didn't think of anybody saving anything Jewish in those times. I wondered who saved it and why? When I went back to New Jersey and told my friends the story of this Torah, they also wondered who had saved it and why.

Unfortunately—and this is my pitch for not postponing your own family research—I had no one left to ask. My father passed away ten years earlier, and my uncles and aunts soon after. So I wouldn't have done more except that an extraordinary thing happened. My mother was cleaning out her closet and found an old folder of my father's. Inside were three typed, yellowed pages with the names, addresses and phone numbers of all the Jews who had survived the Nazis and where they lived, as well as the names and addresses of several former Christian neighbors with whom my father had stayed in touch. It was as if from his grave, my Dad was saying, "Get going! Find out."

I went to interview a few Jews on the list who lived in the New York area, and their memories took me by surprise: They hated the Germany that betrayed them, but they did not hate most of their neighbors. The echo of my father's "In Rexingen we all got along," came back and I was hooked.

Like most writers, I'm drawn to anomalies, something that does not fit my expectations, and this certainly did not. I wondered: How much of what they remembered is true? How much was nostalgia? Was Rexingen a special place, different from others during the Holocaust? These were my questions when I met three Jewish women in their seventies and eighties, whose stories started my journey to find out more. They were my first "Other," and ironically, what made them different was not religion or politics, but age. It was the first time that I, in my forties, talked in depth to old people, aside from my mother and aunts. Usually I rushed too much to get things done, and they moved too slowly for me to stop and listen. That day I did, and on many days thereafter.

One thing I discovered is how much memories can depend on your age and whereabouts, as I hope you will hear in this passage. It describes my first meeting with Gretel, Lotte, and Hannah, and my struggle to assess from their different accounts what actually happened on the night of Kristallnacht. I found it frustrating; I wanted certainty. Instead I got complexity, a very good thing.

READING 1

Fragments, bits, and pieces, no one story to hang on to, no one true version of when Rexingen synagogue was burned on Kristallnacht. There is Gretel's version as a young wife with a hero husband. There is Lotte's version as an adventurous 13-year-old, who says, "What did I know?" There is Hannah's version as a nanny in America who heard the story from her mother, who was still in Rexingen. And the old man's version that I heard in Israel., the one that led me to these women, whose memories are tied to who they were and who they need to be. Others, too, will tell me about who was there and who did, or did not, see a thing, and no one will agree, except on the big pieces of story: That it was the outsiders, not the people of Rexingen, who torched the synagogue. That it was "the Gentiles" who saved the Torah. And that after Kristallnacht, even Rexingen was unsafe for the Jews.

It was a shock. Jews like Lotte's father had been sure that they could ride out Nazism. "He had felt so proudly German," says Lotte, "with his soldier medals and saber from World War one. And our Christian neighbors kept saying, 'Stay, stay, you'll be fine. There've been no beatings or public humiliations in Rexingen, "a few children beaten up in the alleys, yes," but no village support for that. In a village of few radios, the menacing speeches and events seemed far enough away. Until they saw the ruined synagogue.

"You have to remember that the synagogue was our mainstay," says Hannah. "Take away the synagogue, take away that community." The others nodded vigorously. No quibbles about that, or about how the Jewish men, including Simon and Lotte's father, were rounded up the next day and put in jail, a closet-like room in the *Rathaus (*the town hall) which was never used much, except to sober up an occasional drunk. When the policeman—Hannah thinks his name was Krupps—brought in the tenth Jew, one of the

men (Gretel was sure it was Simon) said, “Now at least, we have a minyan.” All three smile at this agreed-upon humor in the midst of nightmare. “Ten men, a minyan, are needed to hold the Jewish service,” Hannah explains. I knew that.

Lotte tells about trying to bring a suitcase with chocolate cake to her father in jail.

“Weren't you afraid?” asks Gretel.

“I was thirteen. What did I know?” Lotte says again. “But when he came home from Dachau three months later…” She shakes her head, her childlike aura gone. Dachau, a few hours from Rexingen, was the first Nazi concentration camp, set up in 1932 for the political prisoners. After Kristallnacht, 10,000 Jewish men were interned there, but most who survived the harsh winter were released.

“He was so thin. His head shaved. My strong father, like a boy. He was a broken man.” Luckily, Lotte’s mother—who was never in denial, had been begging her husband to leave for years—had gotten visas behind his back, so Lotte’s family made the last boat to leave Germany for America before the war started.

Gretel says her family left as soon as Simon was released from Dachau. All the Rexingen men, in fact, came home from Dachau by March 1939. Unlike many of their urban counterparts, who died in the bitterly cold winter, barely fed, in unheated barracks, these Rexingen farmers were used to a harsh outdoor life. It got them through.

I never realized that Jews sent to concentration camp were ever released until American soldiers set them free. “Yes!” Gretel explains. “In 1938 the Nazi policy was not yet to kill Jews—that came later. It was to terrify us into emigration.” It worked in Rexingen. Those with money or connections abroad left as soon as plans could be finalized. Lotte’s uncle in Cleveland sponsored her family. Hannah, already in New York, borrowed the thousand dollars needed to sponsor her mother's escape to America. And Gretel's family left for Palestine. Gretel had sold their furniture for cash, they already had visas, and so as soon as they packed up, they took the train to Holland and a boat from there to Haifa.

I like these stories of escape and survival. Like my parents’. It is the dark stories—of murder, sadism, Mengele ovens— that I have avoided since childhood of bad dreams., Skeletal faces, hollowed eyes, they stared in through the screens of black summer nights in Queens, children like me, still lost in terrors my family had escaped. Could I ever feel safe?

Gretel continues more softly, “But Simon's parents. We could not take them with us.” She looks down. “They couldn't get a visa, and we couldn't wait any longer. We had two small children. What could we do?” She looks up again. “We thought we could get them out later.”

“It was the same for so many,” Hannah says quietly. “We thought they would be saved.” Her ready smile is gone. Everyone is silent. And then Hannah starts offering more linzertorte, as if the thick raspberry jam will sweeten the bitterness that has landed on the table. Hannah’s grandparents and Simon's parents were four of the 89 Jews who, trapped in Rexingen, were deported to concentration camps in 1940 and 1941. All but two were murdered.[2]

If you met these women, you’d think they had lived uneventful lives. They conveyed such a strong glass-half-full spirit. And yet the dark past came seeping in—and that seeped into me too.

Their stories led me to Germany to interview twenty Christians still in the village, and then on to Israel to interview twenty former villagers, all Jewish. With far more material than I could use, I had to keep asking myself: "What material best serves this story?", which is a question I often asked my students. In this story, I needed to capture my struggle and ambivalence each time I entered a living room or kitchen and heard another story. What was new? What did I learn? If three stories were similar, I had to choose. Another choice was to write in present tense. I am not a historian. I am not a sociologist. I am not an anthropologist. The persona I wanted was as a daughter who reenters her father's boyhood world to figure out what was going on and what it had to do with her life. Using the immediacy of present tense enabled me to be that daughter.

My son asked me one day, "Do you think this was a special place or not?" I'd been researching for years and felt almost finished, so I thought it a fair question, one that led to a chapter called "Yes or No." Let me read some of my answer to him:

READING 2

> I wanted to say yes. I'd met enough former neighbors, Christian and Jewish, who didn't hate each other, and collectively the village did avoid the worst atrocities. No one terrorized the rabbi on the town square as in Konin. No one locked the Jews in a church and burned them as in Jebwabne. And the river did not run red with the blood of Jews on Kristallnacht as one villager from the town of Rhina described in the movie *Now After All These Years*… Rhina, in Northern Germany, was a similar size and had a high percentage of Jews, 30 to 50%, depending on the year; yet the Nazis won over the village's soul. In Rexingen, you couldn't say that so easily.

No one in Rexingen saved any Jews, but a dozen or so families did what they could do to help. I made a list of some of their small acts.

> The policemen saved two Torahs. The shoemaker kept fixing Jewish shoes and shared his ration cards. The barber cut Jewish hair under the sign that said, "No Jews Allowed Here." The farmer's daughter cleaned house, washed, and brought food to her Jewish neighbors. The barber's daughter lent her good raincoat. The shopkeeper gave food over the back fence at night. The bus driver kept driving the Jews, one even to Switzerland. The three nuns kept helping Jews until the nuns were transferred. The beloved mayor kept helping the Jews until he was transferred. The priest spoke out against what was happening to the Jews in his sermon until he was reprimanded. The head of the Hitler youth group turned the lights on and off for the Jewish youth group that met in the same building on Friday nights….

That last one best reflects the power of small stories. You would never learn in a history book that that in the same building where the Nazi youth group was meeting, one of those boys is turning the lights on and off for the Jews who, on the Jewish Sabbath, are not allowed by religion to do it for themselves. It muddied the waters, as small stories do. They are just:

> …small acts of defiance. Nothing anyone bragged about, but I, for one, would like to be able to make a mark beside every one of these on the list, announcing that I would have done that and more.
>
> Yes, maybe, if I knew others would join me, not betray me. But how would I know? For decency is often such a solitary act. It is evil that draws the noisy crowd.[3]

These small acts of decency don't make the headlines, so we rarely know about them. And yet if we don't know about good stories in dark times, however small, then we don't have the models that we might follow if we did know. That was my big takeaway from my first book.

Let me return to Lotte, whom you met earlier as she remembered Kristallnacht. She taught me that after you put on your coat, thinking you are done, important stories often emerge. You have to listen for the turn and resist, "I'm leaving now." Take your coat off. Go with where the story takes you.

I made three visits to Lotte's house, and each time her memories shifted. The first time she remembered only good things in her village life such as enjoying the Crèche from her neighbors on Christmas and going often to visit Otto, the baker. Everything idyllic. The second time all her memories were dark. I did not think it was the same village she had remembered before.

In between our two interviews was the holiday of Hanukkah. Lotte had had thirty-five family members over to celebrate and had made potato latkes for all. It is meant to be a cheerful time, but for Lotte, it was the day her father was in Dachau concentration camp and how she kept hoping that on this festival of hope, he'd come home. He didn't until three months later. On my visit the day after Hanukkah, Lotte was still suffering from having to live this double life: of smiling when deep down she was reliving the biggest disappointment of her young life. When I returned for a third interview, Lotte's version of her past mixed good and bad memories, trying to integrate it all for herself and for me. Had I had only one visit, I would have missed that complexity. Since then, I arrange more than one visit for an interview, whenever possible.

Let me make my final introduction. He is Max Sayer, and the reason I wrote a second book. Max wrote me a letter, out of the blue, from Australia, where he has lived since 1952. But it turns out, he was born in Rexingen in 1930, a generation after my Dad, and grew up there. His Catholic family lived five houses away from my Jewish family's house, but as the Sayers moved in a few months after the last of my family fled Hitler in 1937, the families never met then. Max who was seven at that time, wrote me when he was age eighty-eight, soon after he read my book. He thanked me, saying, "Your father was right. We all got along!" Curious, I answered—and his son answered me by email, mentioning that his father had written an unpublished memoir about his boyhood in Rexingen during the Third Reich. No one had mentioned this family to me—neither Jew or Christian—so the Sayers must not have self-identified as friends of Jews. Nor had they kept in touch with former Jewish neighbors—until now. Had they been

avid Nazis (the group I had avoided) or not? This email came during the same week as the massacre of eleven Jews in Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh, and I answered yes. Anti-Semitism was on the rise; I couldn't shy away from its possibility. After reading Max's memoir, I heard our two memoirs talking to each other, as if out of different windows of history. It deserved telling—and so began a new story of how Max, his family, and I became virtual neighbors eighty years after Hitler.

Let me read Max's version of Kristallnacht to give you an idea of his unguarded honesty and his vivid memory for detail that spoke to me with a new perspective:

READING 3:

> But local feelings and trying to live peacefully together couldn't stop the Kristallnacht. Dad was called out as a member of the local fire brigade about one in the morning. Of course, we all woke up by the sound of the fire bugle. We found out that the synagogue was set alight by outside S.A. men.

Notice how Max confirms what Lotte and the other Jews said: that it was not the villagers who burned the synagogue.

> They even tried to stop the fire brigade from putting the fire out, and there was a confrontation between the captain of the fire brigade, who maintained that it was his duty to bring any fire in the village under control, while the outsiders tried to stop their efforts, but eventually the locals obtained the upper hand, but a lot of the interior had been vandalized, destroyed, burnt. When I went to school the next day, there was still smoke coming out of the building and of heaps of furniture and books, which had been brought outside. A watch was set by the fire brigade, about three men, and when we kids came home from school, we sneaked inside to have a look—the first time ever I stepped foot in a synagogue. There were books laying around everywhere, and I picked up a Torah scroll to take home, but when I came home, Mum sent me straight back to return it. The air was still full of smoke and wet paper and material. It didn't smell like a Christian church at all, the whole thing, very sad….[4]

I placed this passage and twenty others in between my chapters to generate a conversation between memoirs, and then added my comments to explain why I picked the passages I did. Here is my comment about his Kristallnacht memory:

> Max's account confirms like Lotte and many others that it was outsiders who started the fire and Rexingers who tried to put it out. But only Max's account lets me enter the burned synagogue as a curious young Catholic boy, unaware of blame or consequences. Seventy years and a generation of regret later, Max's son, who sent me the excerpt before sending me the entire manuscript, writes in an email, "I hope you will forgive my father about the Torah scroll, but he was just an inquisitive eight-year-old boy and his mother insisted he take it straight back where he found it.

What won my heart, so many years later, was his son is trying to make sure I was not upset about his father taking something sacred from the synagogue. I was ready to know him better.

Max's memoir reveals a complicated story that does not allow for easy labels of good and bad. His father joined the SS in 1926 (they supported Hitler long before he came to power). He quit ten years later because he did not like the anti-Semitism. When I read that—remember, it was not written for me, it was not being told to me—I decided this family is not antisemitic, but Max was also a leader of the local Hitler Youth, which he describes with pride. What to do with that?

In the first book, I was trying to figure out: Should I believe this? Should I not believe this? and make judgments. That need faded in the two years that I worked with Max and his family. We had a cooperative project that began with sharing photographs, trying to fill in answers to questions about the village history. He would send me something he knew. I would send him something I knew. I asked him questions that I had never dared to ask before—such as "Why did you join the Hitler Youth?"—and he would answer. In this case, that he was ten and everyone was joining, which was mostly true. I told him, "Not Everyone!" He agreed—and that was that.

Trust kept building. What happened eighty-three years ago was not forgotten; I felt no impulse or pressure to forgive. It was enough for us to share work as a way to move forward. It is what we need much more of today: to talk more to The Other, to listen more to The Other. It's better to find something that you both care about and work together. I thought, "That's what happened to me and Max's family, working on this second book." We dealt with some dicey moments but kept on talking and learning from each other while looking for patches of common ground to stand on.

If we could only do more of that today: meet with "The Other," brainstorm together, find something that we agree needs to get done. Move away the edges of rigidity, away from labels of animosity—and do our project together, however small. After that, with success and civility, we may even say, "Okay, what should we tackle next?"

NOTES

1. Mimi Schwartz, *Good Neighbors, Bad Times: Echoes of My Father's German Village* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2009); Mimi Schwartz, *Good Neighbors, Bad Times Revisited: New Echoes of My Father's German Village* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2021).

2. From *Good Neighbors, Bad Times Revisited,* pp. 34-37.
3. From *Good Neighbors, Bad Times Revisited*, pp. 250-252.

4. From *Good Neighbors, Bad Times Revisited*, p. 63.