

## **Berlin Summer Report**

This summer I spent six weeks in Berlin during which I took a class on “Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue in Germany,” at Humboldt University. The class was a very interesting experience, especially because it also involved a different method to approach some of the subject matter I had engaged with in a class that I had taken at Rice in Spring 2016, and therefore led to some new insights. A part of the Rice class had involved the discussion of the culture of memory in Germany and the examination of Holocaust memorials and museums in Berlin; similarly, one of the main aspects of my summer class involved a series of “conversation walks” through prominent Holocaust memorials and museums—the Jewish Museum Berlin, the German Historical Museum, the New Synagogue—and discussion about their history and impact. A number of the discussions that followed these walks, particularly those concerning unusual aspects of architecture and the idea counter-memorials and “void” spaces, were reminiscent of conversations at Rice, and further led to questions such as those which concerned the need for these memorials when they were created, and the purpose they currently serve in the community.

A number of the discussions in class also involved current German news articles and new exhibits directed towards both the integration of the Turkish immigrant community and the welcoming of refugees into the city. Two of the most important museums in Berlin (and Germany)—the Pergamon Museum and the German Historical Museum—had set up temporary exhibits that appeared to be a part of a clear effort to increase awareness, and consequently greater tolerance, concerning the immigrant and refugee communities and their religion. The exhibits contained displays of objects

ranging from guest-worker papers from the time of the economic miracle to personal interviews of refugees in the city. This display also seemed to indicate the extent to which the Turkish-German community and the more recent refugee community are often thought of as one-and-the-same, due to their race and religion, by many of the European public.

One of the subjects that came up the most in class was the relatively new “Judeo-Christian” (essentially “European”) pushback against the Turkish population and Muslim immigrants following the Holocaust—particularly after 9/11. Following the events of the Holocaust, Germans were forced to come to terms with the horrors of mass-Jewish extermination, and though this was recognized as a terrible event, many of the social and religious reasons that influenced it were never really discussed either at home or in schools. Following German reunification, the German government participated in a directed effort to catalogue the experiences and history of the Jewish population of Europe, particularly Germany, in an effort to create awareness about the atrocities. It is interesting to note that many of these memorial sites involved little to no input or involvement from the Jewish community at the time; this action contributed to the idea that their creation had been undertaken with a purpose that leaned more towards mitigating German guilt than generating meaningful dialogue within the community regarding religion, race and the reasons behind prejudice—all of which continue to be issues in German society today. The discussion of these aspects brought up several questions: does speaking about a community require one’s involvement and interaction with the community itself? Has Germany truly overcome anti-Semitism sentiment?

Many right-wing Germans who present this “Judeo-Christian” front claim that Judaism and Christianity together can combat the growing Muslim population—an argument that is interesting considering that Islam is also one of the Abrahamic religions. Perhaps, it is that anti-Semitism is not as prominent as racism, and “looking European,” which can translate to a presence of Caucasian features, can serve as a general parameter for discrimination. Racism and fear of “radical Islam” are leading factors in discrimination against people of Turkish descent and refugees. However, this new argument does raise questions as to whether people have truly overcome anti-Semitism, or if anti-Semitic sentiment has simply been well concealed and overshadowed by ever-growing Islamophobia. To this end, it is interesting to note that at least in Berlin’s most prominent museums, there are currently no exhibits that document the lives of the Jewish community following the Holocaust. This is of particular importance considering that the new German-Jewish community that exists today retains hardly any aspects of the original of the Jewry of pre-1945 Germany, and primarily consists of more orthodox Soviet-Jewish immigrants with few, if any, ties to the Holocaust. This suggests that following the creation of memorials to commemorate the horrors of past, people believed that deliberation concerning the current Jewish community and facilitating interreligious and intercultural dialogue was no longer needed and was not a priority. For example, one of the members of the Jewish community whom I interacted with—an associate at JMB—had come to Germany from the Soviet Union in 1993, when she was ten. The stories of people with backgrounds such as hers concerning integration into the German community do not often come up in discourse regarding the Jewish population of Berlin.

These are also important is they are similar to what many refugee and immigrant children are experiencing, especially in terms of difficulties concerning language and school.

There is one new aspect concerning the role of the culture of memory in German schools is one that I found particularly interesting and ironic, considering its background: engaging in the memory of the Holocaust, which is a major component in “German guilt,” serves to alienate students who do not have a background connected to the perpetrators. While engaging in discourse concerning the history of the Holocaust, students from immigrant backgrounds are noticeably “othered.” According to our class professor, Germany is perhaps the only country in the world whose national identity is so foundationally based on a culture of guilt. This has manifested in a way such that students whose families have no background related to the Holocaust, particularly those of Turkish or Syrian descent, are excluded from Holocaust discourse as they are considered “unable to understand” this guilt and are incapable of participating in. The fact that guilt stemming from racist, anti-Semitic behavior is resulting in a continuation of minority exclusion from important discourse and a generation of “otherness” is an incredible irony. Recent fears regarding the changing of “German culture” due to the influx of refugees has only aggravated this exclusion.

Additionally, the only museum exhibits that documented the background of Turkish-Germany—many of whom have been in Germany since the 1960s—are temporary. It appears that this significant immigrant population has been overlooked and is severely underrepresented in accounts of German history, despite the lessons of the Holocaust. A large percentage of the children born to immigrant families who came in in



the 1960s still do not even hold German citizenship, and comparatively little has been done to integrate them into the community. Their religion and race is still met with fear from many Germans, and their identity does not hold a permanent place in German history.

Despite the lack of acceptance in the German communities, some more inclusionary efforts have been made to encourage intercultural and interreligious discourse. The class visited a small culture museum known as Villa Global, that consists of a number of “recreated rooms”, with each room created by individuals representative of different facets of the Berlin community—all from different ages, races, and religions. One of the most memorable exhibits was created by a thirteen-year-old girl from Saudi Arabia, who had immigrated to Berlin with her family. Her room contained several magazines, makeup, and religious paraphernalia, in addition to a photo of her with Joachim Gauck. Visitors can also read additional information concerning details the rooms on cards provided by the creators. The experience of seeing common everyday objects in room, in addition to distinctive objects, is aimed towards creating a sense of community and understanding. The culture exhibit at the Pergamon Museum also contained many beautiful photographs and a short film display which documented the everyday lives of Syrians before the Civil War.

In addition to the class, my conversations with members of the Jewish community were also very informative and interesting. These were a part of a more informal project which involved talking to members of the Jewish community in Berlin to see how Berlin Jews in particular have been responding to the refugee crisis. However, as my conversations mostly took place with academics, the perspective they offered were

perhaps not representative of the views of the Jewish community in Berlin at large. The two professors at the university with whom I interacted both offered a mostly liberal, tolerant view of incoming refugees; however, while in favor of integration of refugees in Germany, both believed that the resources available to the refugees were deficient and needed to be better organized. One professor, in particular, believed that the mental health services available to the refugees was severely lacking, and that this was one of the primary reasons for problems within the refugee community. Additionally, according to her, refugees are often not held accountable for their actions; in Germany, the first course of action conducted by the police upon apprehension is to establish the person's ID and residence, and as many refugees do not have IDs, the police often let them go. Following our visit to Villa Global, I also talked to a docent there about refugee integration. While she supported refugee integration, she expressed concern regarding the number of refugees coming in, and the ability of the German economy to support them. Based on these limited conversations and others involving people from both inside and outside the program, I found that members of the Jewish community I talked to are largely supportive of the incoming refugees, but have concerns regarding the method with which they are being integrated and the proportional number of people coming in to Germany and other European countries, like many other Germans.

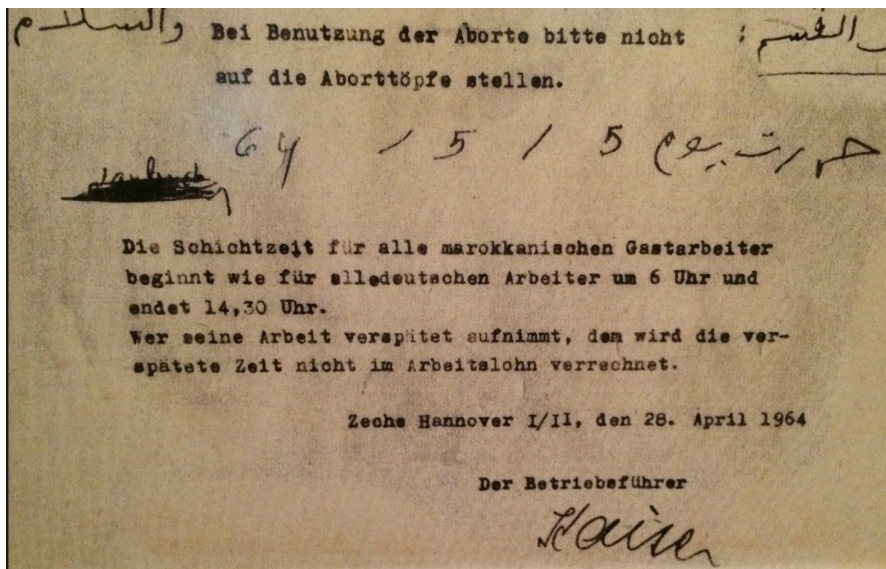
In addition to the stories, visits, discussions and new perspectives, this class helped me to connect with members of the community who I don't think I would've been able to meet otherwise. It was an invaluable experience also gave me the wonderful opportunity to explore Berlin, and conduct a more in-depth exploration of the sites that I had visited with my Rice class over spring break—an opportunity which I am very grateful for.



View of the Berlin Cathedral from the bridge opposite Humboldt University



Gardens outside the Max Liebermann House in full bloom



A part of the exhibit at the German Historical Museum on Turkish guest workers





Tree with messages of tolerance at the German Historical Museum temporary exhibit



Entrance to a display of photographs and short film on a Syrian village before the war



Cupola of the New Synagogue, Berlin—now a museum





View from outside Humboldt University



Behind the Max Liebermann House





A view of an old Jewish apartment block—now a shopping center



View of the entrance to our classroom building



Inside our classroom