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E S S A Y

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The Presence of the Past

History and the Holocaust still weigh heavily in contemporary Germany

MY SON, THE 9-YEAR-OLD GRANDSON OF GRANDPARENTS who fled Nazi Germany just in the nick of time, has been slapped only once in his life. Just last week, for that matter, right here in Berlin, by a man we shall call Krauss.

A child being slapped—even, as here, by a stranger—is hardly a newsworthy item, but this is Germany, and this child is Jewish, and the slapper in question is a very German fellow indeed. So I find myself—against some of my own most heartfelt convictions and wishes—reflecting upon this incident in a way which, albeit unpleasant, is true to my actual feelings and, I believe, a testimony to the burdens and difficulties "innocent" Germans face, even today.

I have spent much time in my adult years—my family's experiences in Nazi Germany notwithstanding—speaking out on behalf of the innocence of Germans who had no part, and who could have had no part, in the horrors of the not-too-distant German past. I have said, on more than one occasion, that I find being anti-German to be a sin as grievous as being anti-Semitic—or anti-any other race, religion, ethnicity or belief system.

So it grieves me that Herr Krauss's slap of my son the other day—and I accept his word that it was a very light slap, aimed only at keeping the children in our building from playing in areas off limits to them—has an uncomfortable resonance for me, seeing as it is also the first time in my son's entire life that anyone has physically struck him. That the slap was administered here, in Germany, by a German, forces me, reluctantly, to re-examine my own convictions.

GERD LUDWIG—VISUM

IN REMEMBRANCE: Berlin's Holocaust Memorial

What would have been my response had the same thing happened in our present home state of Texas, or in our previous home city of Boston—or even in Israel, where we resided for a year with our son? Yes, of course, I would have been—as I was with Krauss—outraged. And I would have responded in the very same way: by charging over to Krauss's apartment, yelling at him at the top of my voice in our communal yard to the effect that "Nobody, but nobody, hits my son," demanding that he come to my apartment and apologize (which he did), and then letting his superiors know what had taken place.

Yes, I would have done all that. And, then, I suppose, the incident would have disappeared, more or less, from my consciousness. The slap would have been forgiven, and life would have gone on, more or less (albeit more warily of Krauss), as it had before. But that isn't what happened this time—not here, not now, not with me. For this, something in my consciousness keeps repeating, is my Jewish child, being hit for the first time in his life here in Germany—and by a German who hardly knows him. Something in me—though it is not something I like, or admire, or would choose to have there—something in me wants to make more of this than merely an unfortunate event.

And here in the form of my own reluctantly participating person, I once again see the burdens the Germans—even utterly innocent Germans, those far more "innocent" than our Herr Krauss—are up against. They are up against history, up against a past which will not—and probably should not—go away. They are up against the sins of their fathers, whether they be their actual fathers or not.

Now, in the persons of myself and my son, I can once again see why Germans—and, I might add, Israelis—are held to a higher burden of proof when moral and racial matters are at stake: because even the actions of utterly "innocent" Germans, unborn in the Nazi period, today resonate backward into a past which, like it or not, is theirs as well. Like the wife beater who, raising a hand to caress his wife, is already somehow under suspicion, contemporary Germans—Krauss included—are forced, often unjustly, to live with the burden of past horrors. Not even the most well-intentioned and enlightened non-Germans who live among them can avoid the human and natural tendency, when negative occasions such as this one arise, to remember and invoke that past.

Should I perhaps, as I considered doing, not write about this incident at all? Would the greater wisdom have been merely to let it pass, leave it behind and move on? Perhaps so, but to do so would also be to repudiate one of the sacred obligations of my writerly trade: the obligation to speak the truth, as the poet Matthew Arnold once put it, "of what we feel indeed," rather than of what we merely wish we felt. My writerly instincts also tell me that, had more people throughout history spoken that truth, many of history's tragedies might have been avoided.

"How do I know what I feel," said the writer E.M. Forster, "until I've seen what I've said?" And so I, too, the son of German Jews residing here in Germany once again, needed to write these words in order to articulate my true, albeit unpleasant, feelings. I have, in fact, forgiven Krauss. But what is harder to forgive—or overlook—is the reality this has forced me, once again, to face: not only the reality of the German past, but also the heavy human burden of helping not only Germany, but ourselves, to come to terms with it.

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