



Print this page  
Close X

## After escaping Nazis, can one be comfortably German?:

Thursday, April 21, 2011 | by alexandra j. wall

### Panel in Oakland examines how child survivors now feel about their roots, language

How does it feel to identify — and to be identified — as a German after the Holocaust? Especially if you're Jewish and your family suffered so greatly at the hands of the Germans?

This question was discussed at a recent roundtable at the Altenheim retirement estate in Oakland. The panel featured three German Jewish refugees who were lucky enough to flee before the Holocaust.

Two of the participants were from the Kindertransport — which allowed some 10,000 Jewish children to flee Germany for safety in Great Britain. The third participant was Caroline Vollmer of San Francisco, who was not a member of the Kindertransport but fled Germany as a teenager.

It was Vollmer who summed up perhaps the central theme of the event when she said, "Nazism and Germany are two different things, and it took me decades to get that clear in my mind."



Ralph Samuel

The first speaker was Ralph Samuel, who was born in Dresden. He was 7 1/2 when he was put on an airplane for England in January 1939 without his family. He wore a sign around his neck that said "Mr. Epstein," the name of the family who agreed to sponsor him. Later, his mother came to work as a maid for the same family.

Though a twinge of a British accent can sometimes be detected in Samuel's speech, he had all but forgotten German. So why did he relearn the language of his youth? After telling his story in Bay Area high schools for 12 years, he realized he would like to do the same thing — in Germany.

"So many people [from pre-World War II Germany] say they wouldn't set foot in Germany," Samuels said, "but it continually amazes me how comfortable I feel there. In Berlin, you can't walk two blocks without being reminded of the Holocaust ... Germany is really coming to terms with its past, in my opinion."

Samuel said that in one classroom where he spoke in Germany, half of the class had taken a trip to Auschwitz and Krakow, and the other half had gone on a volunteer mission to Israel. "My mother never went back, but that was 30 years ago," he said. "It's a very different atmosphere today."

Another panelist, Leo Horovitz, went back to Germany for the first time in 1954, then later found a job that had him commuting back and forth between Silicon Valley and Germany.

"I hadn't spoken German in a long time, but in two to three weeks I was fluent," the El Sobrante resident said. "I had the German accent, but I also had the vocabulary of a 10-year-old."

Horovitz said he found it easy to make friends with Germans, especially those who didn't conform to regular German culture.

Vollmer, who lost most of her extended family at Auschwitz, fled Stuttgart at age 19 with her parents,

and has lived in San Francisco for many years.

On her first trip back to Germany, she went from the railroad to the cemetery to visit her relatives buried there, but refused to set foot in the town.

She returned a second time in 1991, as a guest of the city of Stuttgart. "I went with a heavy heart and mixed emotions," she said. "They did everything they could to make it a pleasant experience for us. They didn't whitewash anything."

What brought her back? Vollmer said it was that she continued to seek closure.



*Leo Horovitz photo/alexandra j. wall*

"My mother lived until 103, and she was pleased that I could go and visit our relatives in the cemeteries," she said.

The roundtable was held at the 114-year-old Altenheim, a recently renovated facility in Oakland's Dimond District that has a history of housing German immigrants. The event was co-sponsored by the Gerlind Institute, an organization offering German language instruction and German cultural events in the Bay Area, and the Middle East Peace Committee of Kehilla Community Synagogue in Piedmont.

Judy Gussman, a member of the Middle East Peace Committee explained that they sponsored the panel because of the belief among participants that "healing the past offers the best hope for the future."

Marion Gerlind, the non-Jewish director of the Gerlind Institute, introduced the panel, and told the audience that when

growing up in Germany after the war, she said she only studied Jews, but never had the opportunity to meet one. It was only in the Bay Area that she met her first Jews, and survivors, as well.

"Only by living in the Bay Area was I able to overcome my guilt for something that happened before I was born," she said. "But now I feel responsible to contributing to healing in this world." She does that by offering Holocaust and genocide education as part of the institute.

During the question and answer period, audience member Miriam Zimmerman of San Mateo, who identified herself as a second-generation Holocaust survivor, said that she had taken up Germany on its offer of citizenship — and is now a German citizen as well as an American one.

Then she asked: Would the panelists choose to reclaim their German citizenship?

Samuel said that he would, mainly because his children might like to work in Europe some day (and German citizenship means citizenship in the European Union). Horovitz evaded the question, but spoke of taking his son and grandchildren to Germany in 2012.

When it was her turn to answer the same question, Vollmer was quite succinct.

"Out of the question," she replied. "No way."