

*Contribution to panel**Status Reports of Survivor Groups in Europe: Conversations with Representatives of Croatia, Germany and Sweden**on Monday Nov 5th at WFJCSH&D in Jerusalem, DAN Hotel***German Child Survivors Active All Along Challenging Circumstances**

by Philipp Sonntag

We German Child Survivors (CSD = Child Survivors Deutschland) feel alike a sophisticated crew, on a rusty ship, amidst a violent storm. Germany is not a country where you can easily relax. Every year there are new mental storms, which require our ongoing alertness.

For us our most important issue is: We really care for ourselves. We keep enjoying our semiannual meetings. Twice a year there are five days, where we feel a mutual and immediate understanding much alike within a family: We need not explain or even defend anything in detail.

But then, how to cope with challenges? Of course also we have different opinions in our group. For an eventual controversy we have had therapists as moderators, who are nice characters, trying to help. But ever since we dismissed them 2015, now we dissolve our eventual controversies in a benevolent way, even faster and more easy going. We still carry our troubles and concerns with us.

The impact of our childhood keeps us alert. We had been forced to “accustom ourselves to” – and now have a hard time to “forget” – that a catastrophe may occur any time out of nowhere. Some of us may well remember a popular song “I can’t get no – satisfaction, and I try, and I try ...” as forwarded by the Rolling Stones 1964. And yes, we did “try, and try, and try ...” to get back into normal life, to become well respected in Germany. Of course we do find and get respect from many groups, from a lot of single persons, but overall we had to cope with quite some disappointments – see the fact of by and large failing re-compensation, of inadequate integration into “the” German society.

To become a respected part of society is an ongoing challenge

- The German society, at the current election for parliament, did elect the “AfD” (Alternative for Germany) with 12,6%, as the first right-wing populist party to surpass the 5% barrier. While less radical than the right-wing populist parties in near Poland, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Austria, Hungary, still the German AfD acts in the context of general hatred of foreigners – and even for quite some German citizens that is hatred of Jews also. For 300 years members of a Jewish family may have been an official German national subject – and still seen as not belonging to the German society. A re-unification, such as for East- and West-Germany, never occurred.

- The German Jewish society, as ruled by the General Counsel of Jews (Zentralrat der Juden), does tolerate – while not particularly love our group. The Counsel accepts only those Jews, who are official members of the Jewish communities, with their religious traditions, mainly applying the Halacha. More than half of the Jews in Germany are not members. In our association CSD, quite distinct from the Council, we have accepted all and any persons, who had been persecuted by the Nazis, because of their Jewish origin.

An essential feature of the current challenges is, that we have to cope with the ambivalence of impressions, in manifold details.

The main feature of our imminent environment is ambivalence

We encounter a lot of “plus” (positive impressions) aside “minus” (negative impressions). When we add up the impressions, then the result does not make much any sense. Facts vary according to contexts. We have to cope with disturbing contradictions of impacts:

- Plus: Dr. Josef Schuster, president of the General Counsel of Jews, who participated on our WFJCSH&D meeting 2014 in Berlin, is sympathetically appreciative toward us. With his generally positive attitude he officially stated, that Jews now 2017 in Germany have best conditions ever for own development, protected effectively by the German government.
- Minus: On the other hand, police has to be present all the time in front of official Jewish buildings, for protection. It has to do with a lack of integration of Jews “as Germans” within the German society. The characteristic statement of Ignaz Bubis against the exclusion of Jews is still valid: “Ich wollte diese Ausgrenzerei, hier Deutsche, dort Juden, weghaben. Ich habe gedacht, vielleicht schaffst du es, daß die Menschen anders über einander denken, anders miteinander umgehen. Aber, nein, ich habe fast nichts bewegt”.
- Plus: At the same time there is some powerful governmental and public commitment in order to integrate Jews, to recognize their role for the German society before the Nazi regime. The majority of German public is friendly towards Jews. In Berlin the exhibition “diversity destroyed” in 2013 displayed a lot of evidence, that Jews had provided enormous contributions in diverse fields for German society, which were destroyed by the Nazis, who thus harmed Germany in an tragic way.
- Minus: On schoolyards “Du Jude” = “You Jew!” is an intentionally bad word among youth. Some adults, as “sympathizers” of Nazis, provoke with abusive language, including evil jokes about Jews. But when we call them anti-Semites, they feel offended – right after forwarding a moment before arguments as taken from “The Protocols of the Elders of Zion”, taken as self-evident “truth”.
- Plus: We as Child Survivors are currently more and more invited to schools and other public groups, as contemporary witnesses. Our semiannual meetings are supported by a German “Synagogue association”, which had with amazing love for details renovated an old Synagogue in Petershagen, and we are always welcome very friendly there.

- Minus: About 2% are Neo-Nazis, 20% are sympathizer of, and co-operate with right wing parties. Currently the expectation within the German society is not, that right wing AfD might achieve more than about 20% in elections. But a few years ago, the 5% barrier seemed to be too high. Now some of our group of Child Survivors say: "Be alert, it started similar, before the Nazis took over." All of us are concerned and alert.
- Minus: As soon as we forward an opinion, especially a political opinion, that may surprise and even offend quite some "established" people. Examples: Our member Andree Leusink has been politically active, such as organizing anti-demonstrations in Berlin, immediately against the provocative demonstrations of Nazis. She did that with strong intention, courage and power. But on our semiannual meeting a few years ago, a therapist as moderator stopped her report about the issue, because it might "not be good for listeners", if she included political issues – she should rather "just speak about herself". A similar experience made our Horst Selbiger, who is currently writing his biography: His publisher, as designated by contract, refused his text, because it would be "too much political". I call such issues scandals, because I consider it as basic part and right of us Child Survivors, to have an own role in society, especially a political role!

Our public presence

We Child Survivors had been rather silent for decades. It's high time we have, and forward an own opinion! We essentially have two tools:

- **Our website <http://www.child-survivors-deutschland.de/>** as provided by our president Andrew Hilkwitz displays a broad, and always update picture of our activities, texts, pictures, impressions – and it has many visitors. It does include some English texts.
- **Our new book series "Difficult past! - Better Future?"** in German language, started in 2017, and the first 3 volumes are available. A basic description in English will appear at KAVOD website about March 2018. The Kavod link is:
 - **Kavod.claimscon.org**

For our book series we receive support by foundation EVZ (Erinnerung, Verantwortung, Zukunft – Remembrance, Responsibility, Future) and by ZdJ (Central Council of Jews in Germany).

We distinguish between three points in time:

- * Living with memories of a difficult past before 1945
- * Disappointments after 1945
- * Hopes for a better future now, as far as achievable. Many of our members are very tough survivors, who have to overcome impacts of the holocaust upon own health, often desperate mood and lack of recognition and support in Germany.

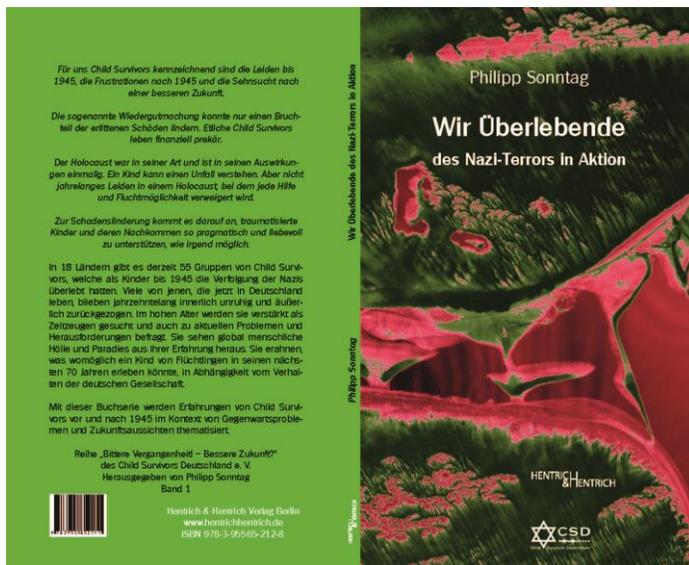
Volumes 1 and 2 were launched in April 2017, followed by volume 3 just now, volumes 4, 5 and 6 are planned for 2018. I confess, as editor of the series, that I feel a bit strange to be

named as the single author of Volume 1. How come? Designated authors took their time, the theme is stressful. The solution for volume 1 was, that at least I could quote many basic findings of both scientists and witnesses about Child Survivors in Germany.

Both website <http://www.child-survivors-deutschland.de/> and the book series display our manifold engagements, among ourselves and in public. As editor of the book series, I use short descriptions of the volumes, in order to describe our current challenges and reactions.

Volume 1: Survivors in Action – How we cope with Ambivalences

Introductory Volume 1 - Philipp Sonntag: *Wir Überlebende des Nazi-Terrors in Aktion*. Hentrich & Hentrich, Berlin, April 2017.



Cover

What, in fact, is the result, what is the long term impact of the holocaust upon Child Survivors who in many cases were living in Germany? Now, more than 70 years later we Child Survivors have the past generations' conflicts still amongst us, between us, and often within our second generation, third, even fourth, our descendants. Even some therapists seemed to have more fundamental problems with us, than with other traumatized clients. We kept asking ourselves: “Are we especially nervous, wounded, traumatized, somehow more than others or in a different way?” Some of us think so, and for a most plausible reason: the holocaust was unique.

Such tragedies deserve to be much better known to the public. We do not expect suddenly to get better compensation, but we feel the need to describe the order of magnitude. For instance, billions of Euros are assigned to agencies for our medical care and socio-political actions. That is welcome. Millions of Euros are assigned to public stone monuments to our fate, that is important. Yet, for the living Child Survivors and their actions under own independent (!) control, even a few thousand Euros for projects are difficult to get, and aside from projects, we receive nothing.

Volume 2: I formed my life in, because of, and in spite of Theresienstadt

Volume 2, Liesel Binzer: Ich prägte mein Leben in / wegen / trotz Theresienstadt. Hentrich & Hentrich, Berlin, April 2017.

The second volume focuses upon one distinct item: Theresienstadt. It tells the fate of one Child Survivor, Liesel Binzer and how the holocaust impacted her and her family both before and after 1945. Three generations are included: Liesel Binzer tells us of her sufferings in Theresienstadt, about her life as a mother of three children and her resilience on a job at a finance office, and about her current work in schools as a witness of the holocaust.

In the same volume all three generations of Binzer's family tell their struggle for existence in quite different ways, revealing the complexity of impacts and their remarkably differing reactions.

Liesel Binzer is very often invited for a reading. She keeps asking herself: "What did I achieve despite, and what even because of ghetto and concentration camp in Theresienstadt?" There is evidence and ambivalence, as she summarizes, what is characteristic, even representative for many of us:

- "I became an adult much too early in Theresienstadt and I still miss my lost childhood
- I never got rid of my inner restlessness, my nervous readiness for danger – even in my now, by and large, peaceful surroundings. My will to live has always been challenged, and then strengthened.
- I am always especially alert with regard to anti-Semitism.
- I have a never-ending drive to warn society, particularly in view of injustice, and the necessity to fight it in all its evil forms.
- What I would love to experience and enjoy, is simply a peaceful and relaxed world and mood, interrupted only occasionally by real danger, that would need my response."

Volume 3: Character, Anger and Resistance – What Experts tell about us.

Volume 3: "Charakter, Zorn und Widerstand", was Experten über uns sagen. Hentrich & Hentrich, Berlin, October 2017.

As an introduction the role of WFJCSH&D is characterized in the context of present challenges and history. Then intentionally different Experts discuss the manifold attitudes, achievements and problems besetting Child Survivors today. Psychological experts in particular point to post-traumatic stress disorders in many psychosomatic forms.

Child Survivors have to cope with exaggerated alertness, excitability, irascibility, irritability, enhanced distrust, suspiciousness, liability to destroy relationships, panic attacks – and many more destabilizing factors. Care-takers and institutions such as Claims Conference tell about their practical experiences.

Volume 4: Unknown Holocaust in Eastern Europe – Old Cruelties and New Challenges

Much has been documented about the terror of the Nazis in countries such as Poland, with reports about major concentration camps such as Auschwitz. However, by and large, much less has been known until now on the scale and horror of the terror further East. Volume 4 explores the details of this history through the accounts of immigrant Child Survivor witnesses who came to Germany after 1990. The accounts are set in a political background of the collapse of Soviet Union under Gorbatschow. After 1990 more than 200,000 Jewish quota refugees came as immigrants to Germany from the Post-Soviet states in East Europe; Belarus, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Moldova, Ukraine and the European part of Russia. For quite some time in Germany after this we had a Jewish majority who would hardly speak German but rather Russian language. About one thousand of these immigrants were Child Survivors and 2006 they founded their own association “Phoenix” of post-Soviet Child Survivors, which is friendly in cooperation with us:

Association of Holocaust Survivors in Germany – immigrants from the countries that before had been part of the Soviet Empire in Eastern Europe. President Dr. Alexej Heistver www.holocaustonline.de

Volume 4 gathers the accounts from witnesses of the time, alongside with three reports by scientists. This includes Wladimir Solonari, professor of History, at University of Central Florida/USA, who points out: “Our book is full of horrible experiences – and yet, it is basically misleading, because these are the stories with a relatively ‘happy end’ in comparison to those who perished, and never could report their sufferings”.

Volume 4 covers the mass murder methods in East Europe, as distinct from the industrial kind of mass murder such as at Auschwitz. One example was isolation in a camp in winter, captives being denied food, and guarding the exit by soldiers with guns. There had been local pogroms even before the arrival of the Nazi mass murders. After the end of holocaust, the anti-Semitism of both governmental administration and people, far from recompense for losses, continued to cause terrible conditions for most survivors.

Volume 5: Remembrance and RESPONSability – Child Survivors as guests in the Ruth Cohn School

On Auschwitz Day, January 27th, the large Ruth-Cohn-School in Berlin invites Child Survivors to visit classes and tell the younger generation about their experiences. Up to eight members of our CSD association presented there one year, meantime our number is slowly diminishing. In Volume 5 Karin Weimann, one of our collaborators at the Ruth-Cohn-School, reveals a vivid impression of these, often dramatic, encounters.

Karin Weimann and her colleagues prepare the classes at Ruth-Cohn-School very well, so that they can host the Child Survivors in a open, understanding way. Through this there is now a long standing and deep friendship between Karin Weimann and one of our members Sara Bialas, who survived the concentration camp Gross-Rosen in Silesia/Poland. Even little children aged ten years love to listen to Sara. Of course she avoids telling them the details of horrible holocaust sufferings, but the children understand the basic message about the holocaust, including what it would mean to lose the protection of family. “Could you take along your doll?” was a question by one young listener.

Weimann’s systematic and all encompassing lay-out of experiences and strategies in

schools allows to use the book as a kind of handbook for other schools, how to co-operate and collaborate with real life witnesses such as Child Survivors.

Volume 6: Child Survivors as Sensitive and Resilient Witnesses

We present our impressions and feelings as time witnesses in an anthology. It should have been already volume 1 or 2: Our Child Survivors have written with emotion, it took time to write about their frustrations with former and current society.

The mosaic of contributing authors in volume 6 provides a spectrum of dramatic expressions, hopes, dreams, disappointments etc., including their individual fights to manage their own lives.

Volume 7: Survival and Creativity

We may or may not achieve volume 7. There is a huge diversity of artworks made by Child Survivors and their descendants. Volume 7 shall explore these practices and works, their importance and role in the lives of Child Survivors today. It shall include various aspects of “creative life” out of often kafkaesque desperation. As a third group, aside historians and witnesses, the artists shall impart knowledge, about how Child Survivors feel deep inside.

Conclusion: Resilience, Hope and Positive Change

As indicated, we still miss our childhood, while feeling our old age. We may or may not be wise. But we are certainly alert to a lack of wisdom in society. We remain vigilant against injustice, fascist tendencies, and violations of human rights. We never give up our dedication and hope for better future.