A Jew in the GDR: Interview with Salomea Genin (2015)

Abstract

Salomea Genin was born in 1932 in Berlin as the child of Polish-Russian Jews. In 1939 her family fled from the National Socialists to Australia, where Salomea grew up. As a teenager she became a convinced communist and therefore had the wish to be allowed to move to the GDR, which she was finally granted in 1963. In the GDR she worked as a translator, interpreter and English teacher. According to official information, there were about 500 Jews living in the GDR, organized in five communities. In the early 1950s, however, many Jews in the GDR became the target of Soviet "purge campaigns" against "counterrevolutionaries" and "Zionist agents" and consequently fled to the West. After Stalin's death, this policy of persecution came to an end and the GDR's state leadership began to accept and provide limited support to Jewish communities. However, the lack of historical reappraisal of the Holocaust in the GDR and the state's anti-Israel propaganda meant that anti-Semitic prejudices continued to exist here as well.

In this interview, Genin describes her life as a Jew in the GDR and her disappointment with the reality of the political system. In 1989, she finally left the SED party and joined the oppositional New Forum.

Source

A Jew in the GDR

by Michael Hoh

After fleeing Nazi Germany as a child, Salomea Genin returned to the land of her birth to live in East Berlin, expecting a utopia free of anti-Semitism – an illusion that would soon shatter.

When Salomea Genin was finally given permission to move to East Berlin in 1963, she strongly believed she was entering her own political paradise. Born in Wedding to Polish-Jewish parents in 1932, she had emigrated to Australia with her family at the age of seven to flee the Nazi regime. She grew up to become a dedicated communist Down Under, dreaming to return to help establish a better, anti-fascist Germany. A visit to East Berlin as a student in 1951 convinced her that the socialist East would provide the perfect conditions for her to finally lead a life free of anti-Semitism back on native soil.

Although her first request to immigrate to the GDR in 1954 was denied, she eventually moved to West Berlin and, in 1961, took up work for the Stasi as an informal collaborator to show her loyalty to the state. Two years later, nearly a decade after her initial request, she was finally allowed beyond the Wall.

However, the GDR didn't turn out to be the utopia she had envisioned. Over the next 20 years, she came to the painful realisation that the communist state was still harbouring the anti-Semitism her family had escaped in the 1930s. Following a severe depression, she finally joined the opposition to the regime at the beginning of the 1980s and, shortly before the Wall came down, left the SED (Socialist Unity Party).

We spoke to the now 83-year-old Berliner, who still lives in the former Jewish Scheunenviertel by Rosa-

Luxemburg-Platz in Mitte, about the GDR's Jewish community, the many shades of anti-Semitism in the socialist state, and her personal quarrels with her political convictions and her Jewish-German identity.

You joined the Jewish community in 1971, eight years after coming to East Germany. Why then? What was your motivation?

I had two reasons for joining. One reason was, which I have to laugh about today, I was hoping to become politically active through the Jewish community. I used to be politically active in Melbourne. Political discussion and political activity were very much a part of my life before I came to the GDR, and I missed that. The other reason was because of the new generation's complete ignorance about the Holocaust. They knew about six million Jews were killed, but they knew very little else. I was teaching English as a freelancer at the Humboldt University. When they found out my biography, they just didn't know what to do with it. I was met with tremendous indifference because of people's ignorance towards what I had experienced in the 1930s, and what I would have experienced had we stayed in Berlin. So I joined the community because I was looking for a place where I wouldn't be continually confronted with stupid remarks.

Did the East Germans' ignorance of the Holocaust come as a surprise to you? Did it come together with anti-Semitism?

Before I went to the GDR, I had been told by the official publications that anti-Semitism had been stamped out altogether. And it was with this illusion that I came there in 1963. But I discovered that people still had these anti-Semitic stereotypes in their minds, like, "All Jews are rich." And when I said to them, "Ey, that's anti-Semitic!" they'd get furious with me. It took me a while to discover why. Because they had come to associate anti-Semitism with murder. And they weren't murderers. People didn't know that to be convinced all Jews are rich was anti-Semitic. They genuinely didn't know. The stereotypes had been passed down at the dinner table. Many people today still have them in their guts, and they certainly still had them in the GDR. And that hurt me so much. I remember what it felt like in the 1930s as a Jewish child among Nazis. They hated me because I was Jewish. So I've always been very sensitive towards these narrow-minded Borniertheiten (bigots).

Were these ideologies also consciously implemented by the government?

What I found somewhat bizarre was that Erich Honecker was always saying, "Wir haben Antisemitismus mit Stumpf und Stiel ausgerottet." ("We have eliminated antisemitism root and branch"). I'd read [linguist] Victor Klemperer's Lingua Tertii Imperii, in which he analysed the language of the Nazis. "Mit Stumpf und Stiel etwas ausrotten" belonged to the language of the Nazis, which Honecker, as he wasn't too well educated, didn't know!

But Jews were still recognised as victims of Nazis, weren't they?

After 1945, when the Communist Party took power in the GDR, or what was then the Soviet zone, it was the working-class leaders who had power. They knew more or less what had happened to the Jews, but most of the Jews weren't resistance fighters. They were only – and I say this, of course, in quotation marks – 'Jews'. They actually differentiated between the Jews who had been resistance fighters and those who hadn't by paying out two different pensions. The resistance fighters were paid 1800 marks, which was a hell of a lot of money in the GDR, and the Jews, if they hadn't been resistance fighters, got 1400. Normal people got 440.

There wasn't any talk about the Holocaust and Jewish history at all?

Yes, there certainly was. All 14-year-olds were taken to a former concentration camp. There were excellent books and excellent films, for instance Professor Mamlock, a film about a Jewish doctor who is chased out of the hospital

he's working at. But at the same time, it didn't teach those kids that it had anything to do with them. “Yeah, Nazis were Marsmenschen. They came down from Mars,” the sarcastic joke went. I was teaching English at the Volkshochschule in Friedrichshain, and I asked my students: “Is it important for us to know about our past?” And one 63-year-old lady said, “Oh yes, it's very important that we know about all these things.” She invited me to her place for coffee. I discovered that she had been a member of the Rote Kapelle resistance movement during the Nazi times. I was talking about being Jewish and what it meant to me living in the GDR, and she said, “Oh, have you stopped being a Marxist?!” By 'insisting' on being Jewish, it was assumed that you were being a nationalist, and that meant that you were not a Marxist. I was unable to convince her. That's when I realised that she was anti-Semitic.

When you came to the GDR, you were a committed communist. Did you deny your Jewish heritage at first?

I wanted to forget it, but I kept being reminded by the others. I grew up with the concept, as most people had at the time, that you only have one identity. And I tried to get rid of the Jewish identity to become German. And then, my world broke down when I realised I will never become German because I am different – whether I like it or not – from the other Germans here, simply because of my biography. And they will never accept me, because they do not accept people who are different from them. This I discovered by the mid-1970s. I will never forget standing on the bridge opposite the Ministry of Culture, crying my eyes out at this realisation, with my tears falling into the Spree [laughs] when I had just been singing that one little Brecht song, [“Kinderhymne” (“Children's Hymn”)] which the left wanted to have as the national anthem of Germany after the Wall came down.

Was the GDR very careful about the image it projected towards the West in regards to its Jewish community?

They were very conscious of this image. In Mecklenburg, only one Jew was left, the rest had died out – this must have been in the 1970s or 1980s. They refused to officially dissolve that branch of the Jewish community because abroad they would say they were still carrying out Hitler's job. So, on paper, they had this Jewish community in Mecklenburg. The GDR was, of course, quite rightly accused by American Jews of not returning Jewish property. They justified it by saying it had all belonged to capitalists. They had confiscated the property of the other capitalists, why should they return it to the Jews?

How did your children experience being Jewish in the GDR?

I didn't teach them anything about being Jewish. But they had no choice but to discover how I was struggling. In the mid-1970s, when my sons were 11 and 13, they planted themselves in front of me in the kitchen and said, “Mummy, are we Jewish, too?” And my answer was, “I don't know. When you grow up, you'll find out for yourself – whether you're gonna have my problems.”

Why such a vague answer?

Because I didn't want to be Jewish! The anti-Semitism of the Nazis had taught me that I was Jewish vermin... In 1991, I went to Jerusalem for six months to find out what all this meant to me. There I had the same dream twice. I was trudging through the world with a heavy stone on my left shoulder, looking for a place to put it down. It was a well-honed heavy stone, beautifully smooth. The first time, I woke up in the middle of the night, and I hadn't found a place. The next night, I dreamt the same thing. And there, I saw a beautifully green, well-cut hedge. And at the bottom of the hedge, I saw a hole which was exactly the size of the stone that I was carrying. So I put it down, pushed it into the hole and woke up. And I knew that stone was my being Jewish. That's the burden I've been carrying all my life, and now I'd found a place to put it. And now I know it's not awful to be Jewish, it is something

that I can – and should – celebrate. So that's what I've been trying to do ever since 1992 when I had that dream. At the time when my sons asked that question, I wouldn't have been able to give a straight answer, because I didn't know whether it would be good for them to identify as being Jewish.

Do you think, if, for some reason, you had stayed in Australia, you would've come to that realisation sooner?

Look, people asked me after the Wall came down, “Don't you regret coming to the GDR?” And my answer was, “You know, if I'd stayed in Australia, I would never have been confronted with myself in the way that I was in the GDR.” On the other hand, there's something in me that says, “If only you'd stayed there and got yourself a decent education, and studied singing – a thing I like to do most today anyway – and not wasted your time trying to organise the revolution for something that is an illusion anyway.” So, you know, this contradiction lives in me.

Further reading

Salomea Genin, *Scheindl und Salomea*. Frankfurt/Main: Fischer Verlag, 1992.

Salomea Genin, *Ich folgte den falschen Göttern – eine australische Jüdin in der DDR*. Berlin: Vbb, 2009.

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