As a child, my favorite part of the children's magazine *My Weekly Reader* was a feature called "I used to think...," in which children reported all kinds of naïve misconceptions they once had, but which they had since transcended. If I now assembled my own list, it would include all these:

- I used to think all Germans were contaminated in some way, just by being German.
- I used to think it was impossible for anyone to find any beauty in Germany.
- I used to think my disdain for the Germans was morally unassailable.
- I used to think that whatever the Germans suffered in WWII, they had it coming.
- I used to think my German-Jewish parents weren't German.
- I used to think my family's history in Germany had nothing to do with me.

After many years, I changed. I had to. Visiting Germany made me change. Making German friends made me change. Being honest with myself made me change. This is that story in a nutshell -- a story of goodness in the present, revealed in a context tainted by the evil of the past.

In 1997, I was astonished to learn that every year on November 9 – the anniversary of the Nazis' country-wide pogrom in 1938 that Americans call *Kristallnacht* but which Germans now call *Reichspogromnacht* -- townspeople in my father's hometown of Mayen, Germany, conduct a Silent Procession and an ecumenical memorial service. I immediately realized that I needed to witness this remarkable moral phenomenon with my own eyes. Soon, three of my closest relatives decided to join me on this family pilgrimage – timed for the 60th anniversary of this infamous Nazi assault on German Jewry.

Our pilgrimage brought us together for three days in Frankfurt-am-Main, where many in our family once lived; and three days in Mayen, where my grandfather Albert had served as the cantor, prayer leader, and *de facto* rabbi from 1910 to 1938. Upon arriving in Mayen, we first made private visits to the four sites of significance to Jewish history that would be the destinations of the Silent Procession the next evening; the site where the Mayen synagogue had once stood (until its destruction on *Kristallnacht*), the building that had housed the Jewish school where my grandfather taught and above which our family...
had lived, the Jewish cemetery, and a massive, basalt memorial sculpture commemorating the lost Jewish community of Mayen. At the former Jewish school -- which I call "the Levi house" -- I leaned my forehead against its doorframe, seeking a quiet moment of communion. In physically connecting to that doorway through which my father and his family had walked thousands of times, I felt as if I were embracing my ancestors themselves, as if we had become united once again on some subtle plane that transcended the limitations of time, space, and death.

On the night of November 9, my family and I walked in respectful silence with some 120 Mayeners during their Silent Procession through the town, after which we all gathered for the memorial service. In the central part of the service, I addressed the audience in German. My tone was solemn, but reconciliatory. I began by saying, *Tonight I want to speak of tears, of flames, and of love.* And near the end, I explained, *I came here today not because I was eager to remember the evil that was done here sixty years ago but because I was eager to witness the good that all of you are doing here today.*

Because my experiences on this trip were so eye-opening and heart-expanding, I decided I had to write a book to share the inspiring story. (I'm now seeking a publisher for it.) I also became a frequent visitor to Germany. The Germans I now know include a retired pastor who translates Yiddish literature for German readers, an elderly couple who met in Israel as young volunteers from a group called Action Reconciliation and who eventually converted to Reform Judaism, a social worker who helped the Russian-Jewish immigrants living in Mayen since the 1990s to document their own unique history, and two men who have labored selflessly for years to document and preserve the history of Jews in their respective communities through public exhibits, books, and even one magnificent website (www.hassia-judaica.de).

Although I grew up convinced that I had nothing to do with Germany and all that "Old Country" stuff, my nine trips to Germany have taught me how connected I am to that country and its people. I believe, however, that our most profound connection is not our German-ness, but rather our shared humanity. This very theme was serendipitously expressed during the 1998 memorial services in Mayen, when a Catholic priest concluded his sermon with this evocative parable:

> In a Jewish legend, a rabbi asks his students, "When does the transition from night to day take place?" And the rabbi gave this answer: "When you look into the face of your fellow human being and you discover in it the face of your brother or your sister, then night has come to an end and day has dawned."