When I was 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.

It is a story of goodness in the present, revealed to me in a context tainted by the evil of the past. And it is a story of my discovering a home, and a history, that I never knew I had.

* * * * *

My parents were German Jews, whose families were among the 300,000 who escaped from Nazi Germany in the 1930s before the noose was totally closed around their necks. My paternal grandfather Albert (1879-1941) was the spiritual head of the Jewish community of about seventy-five families that lived in the town of Mayen (near Koblenz) in pre-Nazi Germany. There, although technically not a rabbi, he served his congregation for twenty-eight years as its cantor, preacher, and prayer leader, and as the sole teacher in the one-room, eight-grade Jewish *Volksschule*, above which my family lived.

Unfortunately, Albert and his wife Ida chose to remain in Nazi Germany even after my father (who had emigrated in 1929 for economic reasons) could have gotten them U.S. visas, because they did not wish to become a financial burden on their children, all of
whom made it to the US by 1937; and because they, like so many others, had underestimated Hitler's potential for evil. My grandparents were therefore still in Germany on the infamous night of terror long known as Kristallnacht, but which conscientious Germans have renamed Reichspogromnacht, "the night of the state pogrom."

On that night, the beginning of the end for European Jewry, Albert and Ida stood at their second-story window and watched in horror as their precious synagogue -- and their future in Germany -- went up in flames. I cannot imagine how they endured that experience, or what came soon after: the jailing of Mayen's oldest Jewish men, including my 59-year-old grandfather, and the transport of the younger Jewish men to Dachau, the concentration camp near Munich. Historical accounts tell us that these Dachau prisoners were released after two weeks, with a warning never to tell what they had endured in the camp and to get the hell out of Germany at the earliest possible moment.

Soon after that unspeakably traumatic night, my grandparents at last secured their life-saving American visas, and on January 17, 1939, sailed away forever from the land where their families had lived for generations. My grandfather died a short two years later, most probably of a broken heart; my widowed grandmother lived for almost twenty-three more years, and is buried on a beautiful hill overlooking Jerusalem.

My parents were not as virulently anti-German as many other Jewish families, although they did boycott German goods for several decades after World War II. I chose to study German in college for the pleasure of sharing a language with my grandmothers, but for decades thereafter, I ignored Germany at best, and disdained it at worst. I hadn't really noticed how anti-German I had gradually become. And yet, if anyone would speak of the beautiful vacation they'd had in Germany, I would feel as if I were speaking with a Martian, a being from some other planet -- for how could anyone combine "Germany" and "beauty" in the same thought? If I met any Germans, I might speak with them in German for the fun of it (I love speaking other languages), and perhaps inform them that my parents were born in Germany. But I would always add, "Sie waren aber deutsche Juden" (But they were German Jews) -- just to make sure they understood that the shared language and the shared homeland were not signs of a true kinship. On the contrary.

*   *   *   *   *

On a visit to my Israeli cousin Chaggit (another granddaughter of Albert and Ida) in December 1997, I read a powerful report she'd written about her first trip to Germany that summer as part of an Israeli teachers' delegation, invited to participate in high school Holocaust education programs in Münster. While there, she also visited Mayen, to see where her mother Ruth, my father's baby sister, had grown up.
Chaggit's whole report was mesmerizing, but the two sentences that were to change my life came at the end, where she wrote:

*Once a year, the citizens of Mayen form a silent procession from the site of the synagogue, to my grandfather’s house, on through the Jewish cemetery, to the site where they assembled the Jews on their road to “the East.” They light candles and hold a memorial ceremony.*

When I asked Chaggit, "What date is that procession?" she answered, "November 9" -- the anniversary of *Kristallnacht*.

This image of German Christians, carrying candles as they solemnly trace the invisible lines drawn by the history of the Jews *in their own town*, first astonished me – and then moved me profoundly. I’d had no idea any such ceremonies ever took place on German soil. Very quickly, this thought arose in me: *I want to see with my own eyes that there can be a whole group of Germans with good hearts!* Deep within me, I sensed this experience would transform me – and for the better. It also dawned on me that these Germans were honoring my grandfather Albert more than I ever had; since he died three years before my birth and my father spoke little of him, he was mostly just a stern face in some fading family photos.

When I told Chaggit I simply had to witness these ceremonies, she said, "Fantastic! I was hoping to return there some day with you!" And so we vowed to make this trip together at the very next opportunity. We didn't yet realize that on *every* November 9, Germans all across the country organize events to mark this day of dreadful destruction, and to remember all that followed in its wake.

Soon, my brother Paul and his daughter Rebecca, then 28, decided to join us on our pilgrimage, which we scheduled for the very next November. That meant that three of Albert’s grandchildren and his oldest great-grandchild would be coming together for the first time ever – in Germany, and on the sixtieth anniversary of *Kristallnacht*! As we planned our trip, a powerful and redemptive image occurred to me: I saw that our coming to Mayen, as the third and fourth generations after Albert and Ida, would be like flowers breaking forth through the earth and blossoming, in a field that had been nothing but ashes.

* * * * *

The summer before our trip, I delved with new energy into a cache of family documents I had discovered in a cupboard after my father's death in 1994. They included dozens of intimate family letters written while Albert served in the Kaiser’s army during World
War I, the Third Reich passports my grandparents had used to escape Germany just
months after Kristallnacht, and the most astonishing document of all: a bill for 1000
Reichmarks sent to Albert as his personal share of the punitive levy of one billion
Reichmarks exacted from German Jewry by the Nazis soon after Kristallnacht. These
documents slowly began to dissolve the mental wall I’d built between myself and all
that "Old Country" stuff I’d never identified with – or cared about.

But as my "German connection" became more meaningful, I realized I needed to take a
closer look at my attitudes to this country I had so long despised. I’d been treating all
Germans as contaminated, just by being the descendants of Nazi-era Germans (now dead
or doddering) whose families might or might not have engaged in anti-Jewish activities.
But it occurred to me that if anyone would try to hold me responsible for an alleged
misdeed of some grandparent, I would reject that responsibility categorically. So my own
values told me that my view of today’s Germans -- who are certainly burdened by their
past but not responsible for it -- was unjust.

I also remembered that the Nazis had categorized Jews for persecution according to their
racist ideas about how Jews were inescapably tainted by their bloodlines, thus treating
long-assimilated, atheist Jews or even Christian converts the same as, say, observant Jews.
But if I condemned the Nazis' persecution of Jews based on accidents of family history,
then how could I justify the way I myself had been using such accidents to treat
contemporary Germans as contaminated by their history?

Ahhh. Another shift in consciousness.

Some time later I discovered one more disconcerting parallel between anti-Semitism and
my own anti-German prejudice by recalling how not only Nazis but also other anti-
Semitic, past and present, would be likely to say any of these:

"How would you like your daughter to marry a Jew?"
"Would you ever marry a Jew?"
"How could she possibly marry that Jew!"
"Poor Tom; his daughter married a Jew!"

Nowadays many people condemn such prejudice. Yet many of these same people (and
not just Jews) would feel perfectly comfortable in saying any of these:

"How would you like your daughter to marry a German?"
"Would you ever marry a German?"
"How could she possibly marry that German!"
"Poor Tom; his daughter married a German!"
This too was an illuminating exercise for me as my encounter with "real" Germans approached.

* * * * *

Finally, the pilgrimage week arrived. Because of our respective work commitments, my family’s visit had to be short: just three days in Frankfurt-am-Main (where many of our closest relatives once lived) and three days in Mayen. Converging in Frankfurt from Israel, New York, and Chicago, we spent our first day catching up, comparing expectations and first impressions, and looking through a twenty-page booklet of old family photos I had compiled to remind us all of the relatives whose history we’d be remembering throughout our trip. The next day, a Friday, was full to overflowing, as we visited Frankfurt’s Jewish Museum, our great-grandmother Rosalie’s grave in a surprisingly well-preserved Jewish cemetery, the magnificent Westend Synagogue for Shabbos (Sabbath) services, and the Jewish community center for a traditional Shabbos meal and Shabbos songs.

That second night, I went to bed exhausted, exhilarated, and filled with gratitude for the astonishing reality of being together with beloved family in this land of our ancestors. When I woke at 2:30 a.m., I lay there in that half-conscious state of the jet-lagged, reflecting on my visit as insights floated up into awareness.

Now that I was finally in Germany, the German language was gradually emerging from the recesses of my memory, sometimes tumbling out with unexpected ease. And then it dawned on me: "Oh my God, German is one of my family languages – just like Hebrew and English!" But it was only this family gathering *in Germany* that enabled me to rediscover its presence within me, as an intimate part of me. And this language reawakening was just one way this trip was helping me to reclaim the German component of my identity – and, amazingly, to welcome it all in.

That night I wrote in my journal,

> It’s no big deal any more -- speaking in German has become almost as natural as breathing. I also want to keep watching this new theme: that Germany has become a place where it’s OK for me to be! In fact, it’s becoming a place that I might actually want to return to willingly, to visit and explore. What a revolutionary idea! It feels like Germany has become defanged, in a way, for me. That’s not quite the right word – but it’s like the poisonous associations are not present. I’m in this country, and it’s a foreign country, but I already know I’ll meet some wonderful people here…

At 4:30 a.m., still awake, I decided to practice the German translation of the talk I’d prepared for the memorial ceremonies. As I read the German version out loud, something about it kept moving me to tears. It felt as if some benevolent force, and not
my individual will, had brought me back to my roots, to speak in German to German people about our shared history, that tragic history that has bound Jews and Germans together for centuries. But I was coming back not in order to dwell on the traumas of that past, but to contribute what I could to the healing needed on both sides. And then I recognized a startling difference between reading my talk in English and reading it in German. In English, I was the same person I had been all my life – my life in America, that is. But in German, I was speaking not just as Albert's grandchild, but as a daughter of this country, and as a sister to my listeners. When I spoke in German, I belonged here.

And it was with that budding understanding that I entered Mayen two days later.

* * * * *

We were welcomed to the town by Martin Dresler-Schenck, a high school teacher whom I have come to view as my own guardian angel in Germany, and as the guardian angel of Jewish history in Mayen. In the mid-1980s, Martin had invited some of his students to research the history of Mayen's Jews for a school project. He then spent two more years expanding that research until it culminated in a major exhibit viewed by ten thousand Germans, including many schoolchildren. The exhibit catalog contained fascinating essays about this local Jewish history, including written evidence of a synagogue as far back as 1338, reminiscences by Mayen-born Jews of my father's generation, a three-page biography of Albert, and photos of Jewish life in pre-Nazi Mayen. Martin first met many of the Jewish contributors, including my father and Chaggit's mother, in 1991 when a small group he had founded called the Christian-Jewish Working Circle had persuaded the town to invite all the surviving Mayen-born Jews they could locate to visit Mayen for a week at the town's expense. (In fact, such Heimatbesuche, or "homeland visits," had been taking place all across West Germany since the 1960s, although most occurred after the fiftieth anniversary of Kristallnacht in 1988.) Because my father and Martin had established a warm relationship during that visit, I knew I could approach Martin for help in planning our visit; and indeed, his warm and welcoming response enriched virtually every aspect of our time in Mayen. And it was Martin, speaking on behalf of the Christian-Jewish Working Circle, who had invited us to "say a few words" during the memorial service itself.

On our first day in Mayen, we made private visits to the four sites of Jewish significance that would be the "stations" of the Silent Procession the following evening: the site where the synagogue had stood (until its destruction on Kristallnacht), the former Jewish school, the Jewish cemetery, and a memorial sculpture commemorating the lost Jewish community of Mayen. Where Mayen's synagogue once stood -- the synagogue in which Albert had conducted services for almost thirty years -- there is now only an ugly bare
expanse of asphalt, onto which several private garages open; a dark, hard-to-read plaque nearby gives only a minimal account of the synagogue’s life and death. Just around the corner stands the former Jewish school, where Albert taught the town’s Jewish children in a single ground-floor classroom; my grandparents and their four children lived on the upper floors. (It is a miracle that this building still exists, since Allied bombs destroyed 65-80 percent of the town’s central district.) As I leaned my head against its wooden doorframe for the first time, seeking a quiet moment of communion, I unexpectedly found myself sobbing. Only later did I understand why: 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.

That afternoon, Martin drove us to see the Jewish cemetery, and the basalt memorial sculpture forming a massive, eight-foot-tall Jewish star. At the base of its platform are two brass plaques with quotations that Martin and his clergy colleagues had selected. The one in front reads:

IN MEMORY OF THE JEWS FROM MAYEN
ONCE FELLOW CITIZENS, THEN PERSECUTED,
DRIVEN OUT, ANNIHILATED

The one in back proclaims:

WE ACKNOWLEDGE, O LORD, OUR INJUSTICE
EVEN THE GUILT OF OUR FATHERS
FOR WE HAVE SINNED AGAINST THEE  Jer. 14.20

On that first night in Mayen, we slept within a stone’s throw of our parents’ childhood home. November 9, the day I’d been anticipating all year, dawned overcast and chilly, an atmosphere that seemed just right for this day of German national reckoning, this day of Jewish mourning.

After breakfast, we returned to "our" house, so the current owners could give us a tour. Since the building is appallingly dilapidated, our time inside engendered mixed emotions. But our most joyful moment arose out in the backyard, when I suddenly realized that the stone wall around the yard was identical to the stone wall appearing in many of the family photos I had assembled in that booklet! With great enthusiasm, all of us descendants posed for multiple photographs, grinning broadly and holding in front of us the family photos showing the very same wall. It felt like such a triumph, such an astonishing turn of events for us to gather in this family garden, filling it with our laughter, our playfulness, and our sheer delight in coming together exactly where our ancestors themselves had lived and loved and laughed.
That evening, around 120 townspeople gathered at the memorial sculpture to begin the Silent Procession. At each of the four sites, a suitably solemn prayer, passage, or poem by a Jewish author was read to commemorate that site’s significance. We then filed into the Protestant church for the culminating memorial service, in which Mayen’s Christian clergymen spoke or read texts, interspersed with Jewish songs sung sweetly in German by a small children’s choir. In the central section of the service, Chaggit spoke movingly in Hebrew, courageously expressing her deeply ambivalent feelings about returning to the town that had persecuted her mother and grandparents. After reading the German translation of her talk, my composer-pianist brother played a chorale prelude by Johannes Brahms, which he’d carefully chosen for its "darkly optimistic spirit." I then addressed the gathering in German -- a tacit evocation of our historic connectedness, whose depth I had never previously understood.

This is what I told them:

I wish to speak tonight of tears, of flames, and of love.

First, let me speak of my family’s tears.

On November 10, 1918, eighty years ago almost to the day, as World War I was about to end in the collapse of the German Army, my patriotic German grandmother Ida wrote to her beloved husband Albert who was serving on the Western front. She wrote:

I weep bitter tears at such national misfortune, and how will it come out for us personally? Everything now is collapsing. My thoughts whirl around in my head in wild chaos.

Just twenty years later came the night of terror that we now call Reichspogromnacht, on November 9, 1938. Ida had certainly already shed tears each time she had to say goodbye to one of her four precious children, as they left their homeland, one by one, to take refuge in America. But how bitter must her tears have been on that night in November 1938, as her beloved synagogue – and her future in her native land – were consumed in unholy flames! And how many more bitter tears were shed by Jewish families throughout Germany, as the Nazi noose closed ever tighter around them, and around all of European Jewry. But this time, it seems, the Jews were left to weep alone.

And now, another sixty years have passed, and we are in 1998. You might be surprised to learn how many tears I have shed as this trip approached. Were these tears bitter like my grandmother’s? Actually, I would say they were – thank God – of another kind. My tears included tears of wonder and amazement at the rich blessing that God has given us, the descendants of Albert and Ida, in permitting us to come together here in Mayen to remember our grandparents and the entire Jewish community of Mayen on this solemn occasion. My tears have
also flowed in gratitude to Martin Dresler-Schenck and his colleagues who have so movingly, so devotedly created this vehicle for all of us to express what is otherwise almost inexpressible.

And now let me speak of flames.

On this night we remember the flames that consumed hundreds of synagogues throughout Germany, the flames that destroyed not only those precious temples of God but also the last remaining hopes in the hearts of all those European Jews who thought that things could not get any worse. We also remember the flames of hatred that turned the hearts of the haters, and the bodies of millions of their victims, to ashes – the flames of hatred that burned across all of Europe and indeed much of the world in those terrible years.

But on this night, especially on this night, we must also remember a different kind of flame: a flame that is far quieter, more subtle, even invisible, but infinitely more important in the lives of each one of us. On this night I invite you to remember the eternal flame of God’s presence that burns in the heart of each of His children, of each one of us. It is this invisible flame which is represented in synagogues all around the world, where an eternal flame, a "Ner Tamid," burns day and night to symbolize the eternal presence of God in our lives. These eternal flames remind us that God’s light never goes out of the world. May we always remember to dedicate ourselves to acting in such a way that this light may grow and grow in our hearts, in our words, and in our actions.

And now, let me turn from tears and flames to speak of love.

As my family and I explore our history in greater and greater depth, including through this visit, we now are able to see very clearly just how much this couple, Albert and Ida, triumphed over Hitler – not merely because they managed to escape from Germany soon after Kristallnacht, but especially because they brought with them, and left behind to all of us, a priceless legacy of love. Despite a life of great personal struggle and sacrifice in their undeserved exile from their homeland, their four children all grew up not as embittered souls but as sweet, loving, kind human beings who were by nature generous and even self-sacrificing. I give their parents, Albert and Ida, enormous credit for this accomplishment. And all of us children of those four remain forever in their debt for passing on to us this precious legacy of a loving and a generous heart.

In conclusion, I want to emphasize that we all share the responsibility to always remember both the ocean of tears and the whirlwind of flames that have forever marked this period of Jewish and European history. But at the same time, let us never forget that eternal flame of love that God has placed in our hearts, the love that our parents and grandparents have passed down to us, the love that God sends us in so many forms throughout our lives, and finally, the gift of our own love
that we can offer to others on both ordinary occasions -- and extraordinary occasions, such as this one.

You know, 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. And so tonight, I want to acknowledge, and honor, the sparks of divine love so evident in this service here tonight, and to thank you for giving me the opportunity to add my own spark to yours. May the flames of love that we have kindled here tonight, as we honor the lost Jewish community of Mayen, forever outshine the terrible flames that burnt on this night sixty years ago.

* * * * *

Because my experiences on this trip were so positive and so eye-opening, I soon realized I had to write a book so they could be shared. I then embarked on a memoir project that has led me much further than I could ever have imagined into my personal connection to Germany, and into the liberating power of intergroup reconciliation. I quickly became a frequent visitor to Germany, both to stay in touch with my ever-expanding circle of cherished German friends and to continue exploring the many dimensions of Jewish life in Germany, both past and present. The Germans I now know include a retired pastor who translates Yiddish literature for German readers, an elderly couple who met as young volunteers in Israel with a group called Action Reconciliation and who eventually converted to Reform Judaism, a social worker who worked with Russian-Jewish immigrants who’d come to Mayen in the 1990s (the first of a wave of over 100,000 Jews from the former USSR, encouraged to immigrate by the newly reunited Germany) and who helped them document their own traumatic history, and two German men who have labored selflessly for years to document and preserve the history of Jews in their respective communities through public exhibits, pamphlets and books, and even complex websites.

These friends exemplify the little-known fact that untold numbers of individual Germans, as well as a series of postwar German governments, have distinguished themselves by undertaking more acts of acknowledgment, atonement, restitution, commemoration, and education concerning the most abominable era in their own long history than in any other country in the modern world. I had known very little about all this when I first visited Germany, but since that time I have discovered much first-hand and still more through research back home. During my numerous trips to Germany thus far, I have visited museums that document the Nazi era with the chilling accuracy it deserves, and have observed a great variety of tangible public memorials, ranging
from historical markers where synagogues once stood, to the thousands of 4"x4" individual brass plaques created and installed all across Germany by German artist Gunter Demnig to commemorate Nazi victims one by one, to massive stone memorials carved by German and Israeli sculptors. In Mayen itself, I met with high school students who study the Holocaust in history, literature, religion, social studies, and even art classes; and I have learned of other students whose Holocaust education encompasses welcoming Israeli teachers and students for classroom discussions, researching the fate of Nazi victims their own age in their own towns, and in some cases, cleaning the tombstones in abandoned Jewish cemeteries. I also know that many German Jews who survived the Hitler years, including many of my relatives, have received life-long restitution payments in their adopted countries around the world.

To those who would object, "But the Germans had the greatest responsibility of all for the Holocaust, so they should do the most reparations and atonement!" I would simply observe that although this conclusion is fully justified morally, it is unfortunately almost never implemented in reality. Instead, the larger the crime committed, the more likely it is that the perpetrators – and their descendants -- will do everything possible to conceal, deny, downplay, or excuse it. And that makes the German track record all the more impressive to me.

On a more personal level, my memoir project has led me to research my family’s German history in depth, using prewar family correspondence and documents, interviews with both Jewish and Christian Mayeners who’d known my family, explorations in Mayen’s archives, written reminiscences by Mayen Jews, conversations with my father’s elderly cousins, and of course German-Jewish history books. I even got to meet an elderly Mayen woman who had courageously aided my grandfather in the late 1930s, as well as an elderly Mayen man who, as a teenager, had lived with his mother on the top floor of the Levis’ house, and so could give me an eyewitness account of both the events of Kristallnacht and my grandparents’ final departure from Mayen in January 1939. From these unexpectedly fascinating explorations, I came to understand just how closely the trajectory of my grandparents’ lives followed the same roller-coaster as that of other German Jews of their generation: from the pinnacle of German-Jewish accomplishments in Imperial Germany (1871-1918) to the descent into hell precipitated by the Nazi takeover in 1933.

Although I grew up convinced that I had nothing to do with Germany and all that "Old Country" stuff, my travels in Germany have taught me just how much being raised by Germans (albeit Jewish ones) has left an indelible German stamp on my personal identity. I now believe, however, that the most profound connection linking me to the German people is not our German-ness, but rather our shared humanity. This very
theme was serendipitously expressed by the Catholic priest who gave the sermon during the 1998 memorial services in Mayen in which my family and I participated. After speaking at length about the heavy responsibilities of the Catholic Church in contributing to historical anti-Semitism, he surprised us all when he segued into 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."