

FULL CIRCLE: ADDRESSING NEW GENERATIONS IN GERMANY

BY HELEN WALDSTEIN WILKES

Deutschland. The very word sends shivers up many Jewish spines. Imagine then, how I trembled one evening last September as I passed the Reichstag steps, whence in the grainy newsreels of my early years Hitler spewed his hatred. Imagine too, my chaotic thoughts as I anticipated entering the stately German Historical Museum to address the children and grandchildren of those who had murdered my family.

That September evening, our family's panic-stricken flight in 1939 away from this very land and its people seemed both recent and real. We had fled, but now, I had returned. Now, I would tell them how it had been for me and for my family. Now, I would speak my truth as a Jew, here in this city whose very name still makes me tremble. Berlin.

I delivered my speech — *auf Deutsch*, my mother tongue. I barely remember my words, let alone the identity of people who so kindly toasted me at the subsequent reception co-hosted by the Canadian Consulate. Of the return trip to the hotel, I remember even less. Only a single obsessive thought remains: "You did it. You survived."

My pounding heart insisted that it was not a trivial speech that I had survived, but death itself. Extinction. Annihilation. Here, in this land, plans had been laid to exterminate me along with every living Jew. Six million had died, but I was not among them. Survival had been granted to me, and now, it was my task to give back.

From Berlin, I travelled to a blur of towns and cities across Germany and Austria. More vivid in my memory than adults who filled churches and halls are the students who filled entire auditoriums. Each day, a new school and a new collection of teachers and administrators reaching out with a welcoming handshake.

Each day, I became increasingly comfortable with my audience and awed by students' willingness to listen. Despite two-hour time slots and the autumn sunshine beaming through windows, the students listened. Their tummies may



Helen's first day of school, circa September, 1941. Courtesy Helen Waldstein Wilkes.

have rumbled in anticipation of lunch, their limbs may have longed to stretch and move freely through courtyards and playing fields, but instead they sat. They listened and they heard. Sometimes, I pictured a feather falling softly from the ceiling, and the entire audience giving a startled jerk as the feather landed. The silence was total.

In most schools, students asked questions only after I had spoken and after a teacher had read aloud from my book. Here is one excerpt from a letter from my Uncle Arnold, describing the prewar steps toward dehumanizing the Jews:

For our first horrendous surprise, the Germans picked Yom Kippur, the holiest of days, to make us turn in all radios and report in a single figure the sum total of our financial wealth.

Blow upon blow followed, usually at two week intervals. Always something else that was forbidden, a new limitation that made our life difficult, until bit by bit, life became impossible. After the radios, it was musical instruments, tools, trunks and suitcases, ski equipment, even woolen clothing and underwear if you had more than two sets. Even the poor animals weren't exempt. All dogs and cats and canaries had to be taken to the collection depot.

Among the questions that stuck in my mind was that of a boy who asked, “*Was wollte die Wehrmacht mit den Kanarienvögel?*” (“Why did the military need canaries?”) I scarcely needed to answer, for no sooner had he voiced his question than the penny dropped for him and for everyone in that auditorium. The army didn’t need aging dogs, cats, or canaries. Asking people to give up a beloved pet was simply a ruse. The goal was to strip away everything that mattered to Jews as individuals and to render them less than human. A process that culminated in Jews being disposable nameless entities, known only by the numbers tattooed upon their arms.

Another student I recall was a young woman wearing a pretty cloth that framed her face even as it singled her out as Muslim. “How did she feel?” I wondered, my eyes swiveling repeatedly in her direction. Does she identify with the Jews because she too is singled out as “other”? Had her parents also fled from a dictatorial regime that threatened their very existence? Had they too found themselves grudgingly accepted — rather than genuinely welcomed — in their new land?

Has the world changed, or are today’s barbarisms merely history repeating itself? In almost every school, students asked variations on the same question, plus one more: What would your parents think if they could see you now?

Always, the latter question left me floundering. My parents could not have imagined that one day, I would not only go to Germany, but that I would be invited as a respected guest. Nor could they envisage that my story and theirs would lead grown men to blink back their tears and buy my book by the armload. They could not have imagined that youngsters, whose grandparents at their age had joined the *Hitlerjugend*, would listen attentively and understand when I said that creating a better world lay in their hands, for they are the future.

“If you can imagine it, you can build it,” I told them. “Someone imagined the great cathedrals of Europe, and although it took a couple of centuries, brick by brick and stone by stone, foundations were laid and the structures rose. A thousand years later, such cathedrals still inspire awe and wonder. Which leads me to hope that if we can imagine a world of harmony, compassion and peace, then we can build it. It may take generations, but brick by brick and stone by stone, it can be done. Whether we do so is up to us. All of us.



The Waldstein family. All perished during the Holocaust.
Courtesy Helen Waldstein Wilkes.



Helen Waldstein Wilkes is the author of *Letters From The Lost* (Athabasca University Press, 2009), an award-winning memoir based on letters from family members trapped in Nazi-occupied Europe.