

## **Back in Frankfurt - With Mixed Feelings**

### **Former residents of Frankfurt visit their old hometown**

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#### **...the longing for a reunion with this rich historical city was tangible everywhere**

"Many Jews want to see Frankfurt again. The Magistrate invites you. More than a thousand registrations." This was the headline in *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung (FAZ)* on 9 April, 1980. For the first time, the city's magistrate invited former residents of Frankfurt who had been persecuted and expelled by the Nazis.

Before the Nazi era, the Jewish community of Frankfurt had about 30,000 members. More than 10,000 were deported and murdered. Few of them survived the horrors of the concentration camps. At the turn of 1946/47, Mayor Walter Kolb had appealed to former citizens of Frankfurt to return to their hometown. Few followed the invitation back then.

In the 1960s, cities such as Berlin, Munich, Hamburg and Oberhausen started, at least, granting emigrants a visit to their former hometowns. Various initiatives in Frankfurt, Israel and the United States campaigned so the City of Frankfurt would introduce a similar invitation program. Despite the ambivalent feelings of former citizens, Heinrich Wassermann, who sought out emigrants in Israel and wrote an article about it, concluded: "The need, the longing for a reunion with this rich historical city was tangible everywhere." (FAZ 27 May, 1977)

Walter Wallmann complied with this wish from home and abroad and issued the first invitation in 1980. In the same year, Tel Aviv-Jaffa and Frankfurt became twin cities.

Since 1980, the City of Frankfurt has been inviting guests once every year to a fortnight's visit of their former home town. 3,700 guests, who are now based in various countries, have taken part since then. Since 2012 Frankfurt also invites children and grandchildren of former residents. The program was reduced to eight days.

Visitors experience a varied program, with receptions, events by the Jewish community, the Society for Christian-Jewish Cooperation (GCJZ) and the project group "Jewish Life in Frankfurt" (*Jüdisches Leben in Frankfurt*), a visit to the Jewish Museum, a city tour.

Accommodation at Frankfurter Hof, one of the city's time-honored premium hotels, where the visitors lodged until 2011, demonstrated the city's esteem for its guests.

What motivated the leaders of the city to such a gesture? Walter Wallmann saw it "simply as a moral duty." (FAZ 09 April 1980) In his highly acclaimed speech of June 1978 in New York, he declared: "Your ancestors gave our country so much, therefore our horror about the past is so great." (FAZ, 16 June, 1978) In his welcoming speech of 1980, Wallmann confessed: "We are anxious and feel uncertainty." Therefore, he expressed thanks to the Jewish visitors for extending their hands to their hosts in reconciliation. (FAZ, 19 May, 1980)

While the program was initially meant to help cope with the past, political representatives now focus more on their responsibility for the present and future. Encounters between former and current citizens of Frankfurt are now emphasized. 28 years after the first visit, former mayor Petra Roth described her personal experiences in an interview: "The impressions, especially the human encounters, have influenced me politically and personally. In the light of the horrible historic events, I always experience this meeting as a particularly moving occasion." (Tribüne, 2008)

## "They built a bridge, we crossed this bridge"

What does the invitation program mean to former citizens of Frankfurt?

The guests feel honored and accepted upon being invited to Frankfurt. "They built a bridge, we crossed this bridge. The hospitality is unforgettable." With these words, **Ernst Fischer**, who had emigrated to New York in 1937, thanked for the invitation. He participated in the first visit in May 1980. (FAZ, 19 May, 1980)

Many of the guests came back to Frankfurt for the first time; some had returned to their old home as soldiers, others in their 50s or 60s, usually passing through on a longer journey. Some needed several attempts, because they developed doubts or fell sick just before the visit. Some refuse to accept such invitations on principle.

Returning to their former home is not easy for the visitors. Many people, like **Walter Sommers**, had tried to distance themselves from the lost homeland. "We were glad to be out of Germany. I gave away all my German suits and bought American suits. I did not want to own anything German," he explained during a visit in Frankfurt in 1992. "First I thought I had lost nothing. I won a lot: My freedom and dignity." He kept aloof of Germany. The hope that times and people had changed allowed him to visit his old home. (Interview with Walter Sommers in 1992) Yet, doubts and uncertainty remain.

Former citizens of Frankfurt "crossed the bridge" to revisit the places of their childhood: Schools, houses, neighborhoods, gravesites of parents and grandparents or native places of their ancestors. They seek out places evoking both happy and sad memories. **Dorothy Baer** loved to go on trips into the Taunus mountains with her parents. In 1939, at 16, she was able to escape on a *Kindertransport*, a British rescue mission for minors; her parents were deported. Her favorite picture shows her and her parents in the forest, surrounded by trees.

**Felix Weil** also left Frankfurt on a *Kindertransport*. He has sad memories of Frankfurt's central station. Here he said farewell to his parents, not knowing that he would never see them again. His parents and sister were deported. Felix Weil returned to his former home as a soldier. "It was a dramatic experience for me: arriving and seeing the destroyed city, all the ruins and starving people. I did not know whether to be happy or sad... I had very mixed feelings. What should I do? Should I get a gun and just kill three Germans as compensation for the loss of my family?" (Interview with Felix Weil, 1992)

50 years later, Felix Weil returned to Frankfurt. He spoke at a commemoration ceremony for the 50th anniversary of the end of the war and before school classes. "It's as if a chapter in his life is closing. [...] It takes a lot of courage to go back," says his son **Loren Weil** after visiting Frankfurt with his father and sister. (Dayton Daily News, 8 May 1995)

"The same city, yet totally different," is the translated title of a documentation about communal and privately organized visitation programs. (Kräutlein 2006) How do visitors today find their way around the city? How do they feel about it? What do they find familiar? What seems strange to them? Some people are pleased that their house or former school are still there or have been rebuilt just as they remember them. Others are overwhelmed by pain and grief. Some desperately seek their former street. "I am searching for my origins and can't find them," **Martha Hirsch** deploras. (Video portrait of Martha and **Erwin Hirsch**, 1994)

Others feel relief that the city is different today than it was then.

Memorials as places of remembrance are also important. In many cities, including Frankfurt, monuments commemorating the victims were built. In 1996, the memorial at Börneplatz was inaugurated during a municipal visitation program. One of the visitors, **Felix Adler**, who was able to escape the Nazi terror in 1940, describes his impressions:

"The most memorable, meaningful and moving event was the dedication ceremony of the "Wall" around the old cemetery with the embedded steel plaques, where I found too many names of relatives and classmates." (Felix Adler, letter dated 12 June, 1996)

For **Marianne Schwab**, who survived as the only family member, the memorial for the destroyed synagogue in Bad Homburg has a similarly important function.

"I had to touch the plaque. ... I had to touch the names, feel them symbolically. There's no cemetery I can go to." (Rieber in "Jahrbuch Hochtaunus 1997")

The Holocaust has destroyed lives and torn apart families and friends. In their new countries, emigrants were busy surviving and building a new existence. Thus, many people lost sight of each other for years. The visitation program not just allows guests to revisit familiar places once again, but also to reunite with former classmates and relatives and to revive old friendships.

For **Thomas Leo**, visiting Oberursel revived the feeling of loneliness he had as a boy. As a "half-Jew," he was excluded from shared activities with his classmates. Seeing his former classmates at a school reunion was a "strange feeling." Being able to join this group in friendship after all these years filled him with deep satisfaction. The former Oberursel resident no longer felt excluded, but welcomed into the circle. (Rieber in "Jahrbuch Hochtaunus 2007")

Encounters with Germans of the older generation are usually marked by great skepticism. And yet, many former residents of Frankfurt remember neighbors and classmates who showed them human kindness.

### **...so that the Holocaust is no longer just a page in a history book**

Former residents of Frankfurt speak to young people in their former home town.

Establishing contacts between former residents of Frankfurt and former neighbors, classmates or schools is one aim of the project group "Jewish Life in Frankfurt." The project developed from a private initiative, parallel to the official visitation program and in collaboration with the city. It was developed as part of a teacher training program and deals with Jewish history education in the classroom. 1984, the group - the core consists of 5-10 people - began establishing contact to former residents of Frankfurt and to interview them during the annual municipal visitation program. Since 1989, the group has increasingly focused on organizing meetings between witnesses and young people in schools. Even before the visits, members of the project group contact the guests and acquaint them with interested schools in the Frankfurt area, contact the guests' former schools or their ancestors' home towns, research their family history, support

visitors in tracing their past and accompany them. The project group works with a large network of schools and other educational institutions like museums, archives and historical initiatives. Training sessions allow participants to prepare for the encounters and to exchange experiences with colleagues. No other municipality has a comparable project which accompanies guests parallel to the city's own visitation program on so many levels over such a long period. Since 2003, the project group works under the roof of the Society for Christian-Jewish Collaboration in Frankfurt. The project is supported by the Hessian Ministry for Education (Hessisches Kultusministerium), which facilitates the partial deployment of a public school teacher.

The results and experiences are evaluated by members of the project group and in training sessions and have partially been published. The project group, building on years of experience, developed a methodological concept, handouts and recommendations for preparing and evaluating the encounters. The project's extensive archive is also intended for the future. When witnesses are no longer there, the memories of these former Frankfurt residents can still be shared with later generations.

### **"Our only hope is the youth."**

When the project started in the late 1970s, the initial wish was to teach young people about the effects of antisemitic Nazi policies on the lives of persecuted people. It quickly became clear that approaching the past through biographies also leads to new insights and opinions, because personal stories show Jewish families not just as victims, but as thinking, active subjects. Reality is shown not just in black and white, but in many shades, which makes it easier to draw a differentiated picture of the past. Looking at the often difficult decisions people faced under the Nazi dictatorship, gives us a deeper understanding of complex past events. Being able to testify about the past means much to former residents of Frankfurt, because it allows them to actively contribute and ensure that the Nazi crimes are not forgotten. They focus their hopes on Germany's youth.

**Walter Sommers**, born in 1920 in Frankfurt, and his daughter **Nancy** initiated a competition in 1994 asking students to research the stories of former Jewish neighbors (1996 school competition). A brochure about the Sommers family presented exemplary personal histories and fates of family members. In a greeting address to the participants of the school competition "Sie wohnten nebenan" ("They lived next door"), Walter Sommers revealed what the project meant to him:

"It will be a great satisfaction to me, and my parents' memory would be honored, if young students seriously dealt with what happened to their neighbors, who happened to belong to the Jewish faith, and who had the misfortune to fall victim to Nazi persecution." (Rieber 2004, p. 225)

"I will do everything possible to educate young people and ensure that the Holocaust is not just a page in a history book. [...] Our only hope is the youth," spoke **Felix Weil** at a visit to his native city of Frankfurt. (Dayton Daily News, 8 May 1995)

For **Rolf Kaufmann**, the interest in his life story was crucial for his decision to accept the city's invitation. He was initially unsure if he should actually come to Frankfurt. Here are excerpts from his speech in front of his congregation in Columbus, Ohio in September 2008:

"This was the single item that immediately turned my doubts into the decision to make the trip. Here was a chance to educate and tell my story to this new generation and possibly make a

difference. About 15 or 20 from our group did that as well. That turned out to be the highlight of the trip for those of us that volunteered. It was this invitation to speak to students that indicated to me just how serious the City of Frankfurt was about the reconciliation process." (Address by Rolf Kaufmann, 2008)

Rolf Kaufmann's experiences show the importance of dialog between people living in Germany and victims of Nazi persecution and their descendants.

Therefore, in addition to researching the history of Frankfurt Jews, the project group began in 1989 to organize encounters between witnesses and youths, students and teachers. This allowed more than 10,000 young people in Frankfurt and the surrounding area to speak to former residents of Frankfurt. However, careful planning was prerequisite for these encounters. The project team developed a concept to intensively prepare all participants for these encounters.

It began with **Ruth and Max Sommer**. Speaking to young people today was the major concern for Ruth Sommer's visit to Germany. On one hand, she wanted to share her life story with young people; on the other, she hoped Germany might have changed. In a letter, she expressed what the discussion with the young people meant to her:

"This trip was very valuable for us, especially for my husband, who lost his parents. Now he can say that things have changed. This is very important for him. ... My visit to the school was an important experience, because it proved that the Germany we saw was not the one we remembered. Now I know that the words 'Never again' are just as serious to them as to us. After all, that is the only hope for the future." (Letter by Ruth Sommer, 1989)

The response of the young people shows, just like Ruth Sommer's reaction, that such encounters can transmit much more than historical facts and experiences.

One girl replied to Ruth Sommer in a letter/report:

"At first I felt uneasy. I did not know how to approach her. She told us about her childhood, her fears, her homesickness. After this, I was better able to put myself in her position. I had so many questions, but I did not dare to ask them. I did not want to hurt her by reminding her of back then. [...] She did not blame us. Still I felt a certain anxiety. I cannot describe it! It was just there. Maybe I was afraid, or it was admiration, because she came to us and reported about her past. I think it takes a lot of courage. Thank you!"

On one hand, many young people are still shy, like this student - sometimes not free of prejudice - but on the other hand, they are very open and curious. This also applies to youths from immigrant families. They often compare their own experiences to personal stories of former Frankfurt residents.

"I had many similar experiences, such as migrating to a completely strange country and the ensuing initial difficulties. I see many circumstances more clearly now," reports a Kurdish student. (Rieber 2005)

The meetings, as the statements show, are a bridge between past and present, between people of different generations, religions and nations. This dialogue allows to verify and correct images and forms the basis for new relationships.

**Something new begins: children of former Frankfurt residents meet current residents**

"We leave you now, filled with exciting experiences. We will tell our children and grandchildren not just about the disaster and the tragedy, but also about the hope that there will be a better understanding between us," said **Kalman Givon** at his farewell address at the Frankfurt's city hall (*Römer*) in 1995.

The lives of later generations are also affected by the Nazi era. They grow up with stories and pictures provided by their parents or grandparents - or with silence. This affects their stance towards their ancestors' country of origin. Some are curious, others feel uneasy or burdened. Since the 1990s, the project group "Jewish life in Frankfurt" offers seminars and meetings for the children and grandchildren of former residents of Frankfurt during their visits to give them an opportunity to share their thoughts and feelings with each other. Members of the 2nd and 3rd generations accompanied their parents on visits to Frankfurt.

These meetings were very well received and made clear both the interest to find the family roots in Germany, as well as the need to interact with the people living here. Members of the 2nd generation received their own voice, which some raised to hold a speech at the final reception at Frankfurt's city hall.

In 2007, when it became clear that the invitation program for former Frankfurt residents was coming to an end, the city council agreed to continue the invitation program for subsequent generations - so far unique in the Federal Republic of Germany. This resolution found great response at home and abroad. The city's decision to continue the dialog with children of former Frankfurt residents is therefore an important, progressive move.

In 2012, Frankfurt's visitation program for the first time explicitly addressed former residents and their children. The project group participates in this program and contributes to its evolution. In consultation with various organizations, Frankfurt's head office created a program tailored to the needs of future generations.

With this invitation to children of former residents of Frankfurt, the question how the holocaust and its consequences affect later generations and how we want to remember past crimes in the future gains importance. Therefore, the project group "Jewish life in Frankfurt" now uses the city's first invitation program as an occasion to document the experiences made with this new program.

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