

# THE MEETING PLACE

The patrons at a once-a-week café, all of them Holocaust survivors residing in Germany, are vulnerable yet strong. Dignified, yet easily wounded. And each has a story to tell – or not

By Jan Rubel / Photos by Frank Schultze, Zeitempiegel

FRANKFURT, Germany – Three ladies at table 3 lean forward to evaluate the *bienenstich*. The first declares the cake intolerable. “For these almonds, you need a magnifying glass,” the second sighs. The third rearranges her bronze-colored silk scarf and launches into a discourse on the proper proportions of cake and caramel: “Just a smattering of honey, no more!” The sound of a Csardas wafts through the room from the opposite corner, played softly by an accordion labeled “Weltmeister.” The traditional Hungarian folk dance meanders over the heads at four long tables, and is lost among the carved adornments and marquetry of the recessed 15-foot ceiling.

“On the transport we talked about baking nonstop, we were so hungry,” 88-year-old Nora O. remarks. Lilly M., 89, agrees. They are from the same village in eastern Poland. “I didn’t see you in Birkenau,” Nora adds, cake fork poised, “even though we both got stuck in traffic.” Both women had had their heads shaved and made it as far as the door to the gas chamber. But it was full, and they were sent back to the barracks. “We first ran into each other again in Bergen-Belsen,” says Lilly M.

A coffee cup jangles against its saucer and a lady inclines her head, blushing. “Just for once, could you discuss something other than cake recipes?” she asks.

This café is unusual, an exclusive club where no one chose freely to be a member. The price of admission is high. A bald man sips hastily at his cup and glances toward the coat rack as though searching for something. There is a charred scent of coffee. Short and pow-

erfully built, with small, glittering eyes, the man keeps his identity to himself.

“It can’t interest anyone,” he explains. He would rather not talk about his ongoing, decades-long refusal to communicate his whereabouts to the German authorities. How he has savings, but no health insurance. The people who run the café know only the number of his post office box. He made up his mind never again to appear on a list.

The guests refer to the café simply as “the meeting place.” A man gently brushes a lady’s shoulder with his left hand as he passes the “Golden Girls” table, where the most fashionable women like to sit. Opposite, at table 2, Siegfried A. sees the gesture and smiles. “He’s doing *shidduch*,” he says. “Looking for a wife.”

Eighty-nine years old, Siegfried A. sits leaning on his cane. As he does every time he comes here, he has removed a forest green suit from its protective plastic covering, crisply ironed a white shirt, tied his tie in a Windsor knot. He thrusts out his chin and begins with a joke: “What were you doing at the radio station, Shmuel?”

“Ap-p-p-lying for a j-j-job as an an-announcer.”

“And? Did you get it?”

“No, th-they’re a b-b-bunch of ant-anti-Semites!”

Siegfried A. likes to tell jokes, especially when trouble is in the air. It relieves the tension. “This morning I was talking to my next-door neighbor. He told me about his back operation, saying he always knew Jewish doctors were the best. And I thought, why is he telling me this? Is he anti-Semitic, or am I just going crazy?”



The weekly gathering at the café. An exclusive club where no one chose freely to be a member, and with a high price of admission.

Eleven native languages could be heard here, but most confine themselves to German. “Here I don’t have to explain anything,” Siegfried A. says. “Everybody knows the score.”

The people at the tables lean toward each other. There are gentle smiles. A soft murmur of voices masks the music. Siegfried A. heaves himself out of his chair and gently lays both index fingers on the table, his eyes magnified by his horn-rimmed glasses. “Shall we dance, milady?” he asks his wife, squinting. Anna A. looks up and laughs.

But no. His legs have trouble carrying him. They are a bit too heavy for the quick polka the accordion is striking up just now. But the dimples at the corners of his mouth make everything easy, coaxing a smile from her in no time. Just like in the old days, when they first saw each other at a dance. It was 1951. Siegfried lets his gaze rest on her and says, “Well, darling, that’s the way it is.”

“What?”

“Everything is the way it is.” About four dozen people are seated at the tables today. “Five regulars died in the last week,” Siegfried A. points out from across the table. Many of the patrons are virtually housebound, only seldom going out to shop or to see a doctor. Many spouses are dead, many children have emigrated. So when the Central Jewish Welfare Bureau (ZWSB) hosts the event in the belle époque mansion in Frankfurt every Wednesday afternoon, it is – for many – a highlight.

A large room there is transformed into a café, where the ZWSB offers patrons cakes, tea and coffee (and sometimes live music) for free, and a place to meet others who all share similar experiences: All the guests are Holocaust survivors who have been invited to the weekly gathering by the organization. The Frankfurt headquarters of the Welfare Bureau rents the room from the owner of the villa, B’nai B’rith International; the building is located just behind the local synagogue.

## Rendered stateless

There are an estimated 40,000 Jewish survivors of the Holocaust in Germany, an estimate tallied by local communities because the federal bureaucracy keeps no records. Very little is known about them. Germany boasts one solitary study about the country’s survivors, carried out in the 1980s.

Many of the café guests were stranded in the land of the perpetrators in 1945 as residents of Allied refugee camps for displaced persons, rendered stateless by persecution. Around 184,000 Jews from all over Europe were still living in the DP camps in 1947. In the end, 28,000 of ▶





◀ them stayed on for good. Their families gone, they laid the foundations for a Jewish community with the highest birth rate on earth.

The smartphones are out at the Golden Girls' table. "Look, my great-granddaughter is two weeks old," Manja B. says, passing the display around the table. "What a *Menschele!*"

Between them, the five women have 14 children, 25 grandchildren, and 43 great-grandchildren. Other than their families, the pressing topic on their minds is Germany's faltering attempt to ban its neo-Nazi political party, the NPD. "What's taking them so long?" a stocky woman to Manja B.'s left says. "They're common criminals!"

When the murderous National Socialist Underground terror cell was exposed in November, 2011, many café regulars told their children: You must find a way to leave Germany.

Indeed, Germany is, not surprisingly, a topic all its own. Manja B. says she has never bought a German car: "That's impossible. I like living here, but I can't make common cause with this nation." Her gaze rests on the little coffee spoon on the table as she shakes her head. Back then something occurred that can never be truly resolved, "not even for the Germans."

The one-time displaced persons live as though their bags were already packed – even if they stand forgotten in a corner. Manja B. has lived in Frankfurt since 1945 and has acquired Israeli and Canadian citizenship. But she would never dream of becoming a German. "Here in Frankfurt they always treat me well, and I've never been insulted as a Jew. But I can't make myself get closer than that." She rode from Auschwitz to Bergen-Belsen on an open flatcar. "Everybody saw us. They all knew what was going on."

Another thing many of the patrons do not want from Germany is money. "Tell me, Emily, have you applied for a 'ghetto pension'?" a social worker calls out to a lady in a cloche hat. Emily P. strides slowly across the parquet floor to reply, her head proudly erect. No one is supposed to know that her eyes see only gray outlines. "No thanks, there's no need," the 92-year-old says firmly. She is still living on a fake ID acquired during the war. She has never submitted a claim for restitution.



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Few here are well-off. Of the guests, 30 percent receive public assistance. Half live on less than 1,000 euros a month. Filling out forms and asking for help does not come easily to them. It is a matter of self-reliance.

Two social workers and two psychotherapists attend the weekly events, all four of them children of survivors. They broker social services including nursing and other medical care, accompany them to various authorities, educate the survivors about their legal rights. And listen.

"Is the driver here yet?" Emily P. moves purposefully toward the door, her lips pressed together. She is smarting from a confrontation with someone next to her at the table, who had taken her regular spot. "The gall," she had called out loudly, pushing back her hat.

Many of those here are under strain, masking tension and irritability with gruff obstinacy. Suddenly there is a collective wince at table 3. Outside, a glass-recycling container is being emptied. The seemingly unending clatter makes their expressions stiffen. When the noise suddenly ceases, they lean back. Lilly M. flicks a crumb off the tablecloth.

Emily P., too, had paused abruptly in her progress toward the door, but now creeps onward, one foot at a time. Outside a volunteer aide is waiting for her. The



café organizes her transportation home. She does not trust taxi drivers.

As a social worker escorts Emily P. to the car, a man in a brown corduroy suit grasps her sleeve. It is Josef B. "I forgot my glasses. Can you take a look at this letter?"

After the war he opened a laundromat and later went into the real estate business. Until his retirement, his secretary read his correspondence aloud. His childhood was spent in hiding places and concentration camps. He never saw the inside of a school.

A tango now urges insistently from the far corner of the room. "*Ikh hob di kh tsu-fil lib* [I love you too much]" the Golden Girls at table 1 sing as the "Fs" enter the room. It is half past five. Max F. gently helps his Alice out of her coat. "Ach," he says, sitting down next to Siegfried A. and stretching his back like a cat. "A story just about this café? Nobody cares

'EMILY, HAVE YOU APPLIED FOR A "GHETTO PENSION?" A SOCIAL WORKER CALLS OUT. EMILY P. STRIDES SLOWLY ACROSS THE PARQUET FLOOR TO REPLY, HER HEAD PROUDLY ERECT. 'NO THANKS, THERE'S NO NEED.'

about Jews anymore. Now they have the Turks. You should write about how anti-Jewish stereotypes are gradually being taken over for use against Muslims. That's your story."

Max F. is tall and wiry. He shakes his head. No, he does not want to talk. And yes, the Germans are still looking for a scapegoat, a tangible one. And now he speaks, does not stop speaking: Nothing has changed, he says. "Just look at the theatrics about Syria. Yet again, there is persecution and mass murder and nothing is being done."

The guests at the meeting place are at once vulnerable and strong. So dignified, so easily wounded. Under the watchful eyes of his Anna, Siegfried A. permits himself another piece of raspberry torte, murmuring, "A little sugar won't kill me."

Even the tumor in his head, discovered years before, is taking its time killing him. He puts a finger to his chin and attempts a joke: "I don't care whether I die sooner or later." For a long moment, the table is silent.

Max F. has the floor. Now he tells his story. For many years Alice and Max F. toured local schools, depicting how they met on their first day at a concentration camp and fell in love. How they survived the death marches leaving Auschwitz and how, with the help of the Red Cross, he found her after the war in a sanatorium in Scandinavia. "Don't expect me ever to divorce you," he told her at the wedding. But many years have passed since the last time they received an invitation from a school.

Sometimes the café's entire clientele takes field trips. The social workers rent a bus. Once they visited Berlin, to see the villa where in 1942 the Wannsee Conference was held to plan details of the Final Solution to the "Jewish question." When the group had taken their seats to leave, one regular was missing. She had taken the opportunity to use the villa's restroom. Back on the bus, she announced, "Shitting here was a pleasure."

It is last call. The accordion plays its final encore, and a slender woman stands up and sings, "Oh, Odessa, wherever I go, I think of you." The others are already fussing with their purses, putting on their coats, heading for the door. As the music fades, Siegfried A. jokes softly, "*Juden raus!*"