

Anti-Semitism is still alive in Germany 70 years after the Holocaust



German Chancellor Angela Merkel lays a wreath at the former Dachau concentration camp in 2015.

Paul Hockenos is the author of "Berlin Calling: A Story of Anarchy, Music, the Wall and the Birth of the New Berlin." The opinion in this article belong to the author.

(CNN)The facts jar and perplex ordinary Germans: Seventy years after the Holocaust, anti-Semitism is still alive in Germany — and apparently getting worse.

So concerned are Germany's lawmakers, they've just established a high-level commissioner post to fight discrimination against the Jewish community. Even after decades of rigorous political education and intense, self-critical soul searching, 9% to 10% of Germans express classic anti-Semitic feelings, according to a 2017 report commissioned by the Bundestag. Many more, up to 50%, harbor more mild anti-Semitic prejudices.

The issue was catapulted to the foreground this year when, in protest against US recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital, demonstrators — some

waving Palestinian flags — burned Israel's flag beneath Berlin's Brandenburg Gate and in migrant-rich neighborhoods.

The ugly outbursts and a spike in anti-Semitic incidents — insults, assaults, graffiti — come against the backdrop of the far right's ascendance across Europe. Xenophobic populists now sit in the German parliament, too.

Because most Germans are so sensitive about the issue, I for one didn't anticipate the cries of protest when Berlin politico Sawsan Chebli, a Muslim, proposed making it mandatory for all Germans — among its population millions of migrants with no link to the Nazi reign — to visit one of the former Nazi concentration camps, which are today memorials and learning museums.

"It makes sense to me," said Chebli, a 39-year-old daughter of Palestinian refugees and currently deputy minister in Berlin's City Hall, "that everyone in this country be required at least once in their life to visit a concentration camp memorial. And that applies to those who have come to Germany recently, too," she told Bild newspaper, referring to refugees and other immigrants.

Chebli, it seems, believes that such visits would help keep all Germans acutely aware of the Third Reich's crimes. I was caught off guard by the tiff as I thought camp memorial visits were already mandatory in German high schools. Personally, I don't know a single German who hasn't visited a former concentration camp. And, despite the small-scale triumphs of a new nativist party called the Alternative for Germany, or AfD, Germans strike me as uniquely conscious of the atrocities that a dictatorship carried out in the name of their nation — and its meaning for the present.

Because of postwar "coming to terms" with the past, anti-Semitism today has no place in Germany's mainstream public discourse, even if it lurks on the extreme ends of the political spectrum.

But I was wrong about the schools: Only Bavaria (as did communist East Germany) insists that every school kid tour one of the camps.

One study shows that 43% of Germans have never set foot in one of the exhibitions. The number is almost twice as high for Germans with Turkish migration backgrounds, according to a Zeit survey. Moreover, young Germans know even less about the Holocaust: Forty-one percent of German junior high and high school pupils claim not to know that Auschwitz was a German death camp.

And on the street, Jews in Germany are increasingly vulnerable: In the first half of 2017, for example, anti-Semitic crimes crept up from 654 to 681, according to German government figures. Germany's Interior Ministry says that 93% of those anti-Semitic hate crimes were perpetrated by right-wing extremists.

Jews say they are increasingly wary about living in Germany.

The blowback to Chebli's proposal was overwhelmingly frosty, with pointed exceptions, such as the Central Council of Jews in Germany, which has long called for similar measures.

An official of the socialist Left Party, among others, objected that making anything compulsory is a sure way to make it unpopular, especially for young people.

The memorials' staff chimed in that they had better results with students who were there of their own volition rather than those unwillingly dragged around by teachers. Moreover, they complained, they didn't have personnel to handle so many visitors.

The right-wing nationalists of AfD predictably rejected it out of hand, convinced as they are that Germany is self-destructively obsessed with the Nazi past. The party, now in the Bundestag, has even called for cutting funds to the memorials — which it thankfully does not have the votes to make happen.

In light of the evidence — and discounting the AfD's dark fantasies — I stick to what I thought was written in stone, namely that schoolroom curricula, in high schools and immigrants' integration classes, should include on-site experiences to Nazi-era sites that are linked to in-class readings and films.

If the memorials need more staff, then Germany can surely find money to pay them. Small groups would make the experience even more intense, and maybe students who didn't initially didn't show interest would be jolted awake.

If a day in the likes of the former Auschwitz, Dachau or Buchenwald camps doesn't do it, then probably nothing will. Visiting a former camp, as anyone who has done so knows, is extremely powerful stuff.

To its credit, since the flag burnings earlier this month, Germany recognized that it still has an anti-Semitism problem, which Muslim newcomers have exacerbated, but by no means caused. One of the first moves of the Bundestag this year was to announce new legislation aimed at countering anti-Semitism.

Germany's rigorous postwar processing of history has contributed to making Germany a liberal, modern country. But it can't claim "mission accomplished" and walk away. Now more than ever it has to redouble its efforts as Germany is considered a model democracy and mentor to Central and Eastern Europeans, who are struggling to maintain liberal norms.

Chebli believes that the experience of visiting a former Nazi site could be a cornerstone of German identity that everyone in the country could share, instilling in all Germans contempt for discrimination and racial hatred.

Just as Muslims ungladly suffer religious discrimination in Europe, she argues, they should grasp the consequences of racist ideas on others and hopefully raise their voices against anti-Semitism.

Chebli has the right idea: Bring Christians, Muslims, Jews and Germans of all faiths or none at all together in the process, with educational trips to the camp memorials serving as a touchstone.

But uniting Germans in the name of tolerance and human rights would mean taking Islamophobia just as seriously as anti-Semitism. This unfortunately won't

be the job of the new commissioner for anti-Semitism.

Source: <https://www.cnn.com/2018/01/25/opinions/anti-semitism-in-germany-hockenos-opinion/index.html>

[Disclaimer]