

THE DORIT AND GERALD PAUL  
PROGRAM FOR THE STUDY OF GERMANS  
AND JEWS

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Professor Amir Eshel  
Stanford University

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"Jewish Memories,  
German Futures: Recent  
Debates in Germany  
about the Past"



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The Robert A. and Sandra S. Borns  
Jewish Studies Program  
Indiana University  
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## *Foreword*

The text that follows reproduces the first of two public presentations that Professor Amir Eshel, of Stanford University, offered as the 2000 Paul Lectures. Delivered in Indianapolis on September 21, 2000, "Jewish Memories, German Futures" draws detailed attention to ongoing debates within Germany about the country's past and its formative role in shaping the ways in which both Germans and Jews think about themselves and one another. Focusing on a much-publicized dispute that took place during the fall of 1998 between the writer Martin Walser and Ignaz Bubis, at the time the Chair of the Central Committee of Jews in Germany, Professor Eshel shows how divergent memories regarding the Nazi Holocaust reflect the complexities of a newly emerging German national identity. Especially in the post-unification period, there is a growing weariness with the presence of the Holocaust in public discourse and, at the same time, a desire on the part of many Germans to reassert a measure of national pride. Set against these tendencies, however, and in serious conflict with them, there is also an insistence on what Professor Eshel calls "the priority of a culture of memory." These divergent demands culminated in the Walser-Bubis confrontation in dramatic fashion. They reveal, once again, the extent to which major questions about the Nazi period and the fate of the Jews remain unresolved and continue to influence cultural trends today.

Professor Eshel's explication of the Walser-Bubis debate took place against the backdrop of certain events in Germany that are troubling. There were synagogue attacks this past year in Berlin, Düsseldorf, Erfurt, and Essen; a grenade attack at a railway station in Düsseldorf that injured ten people, six of them Jews; the continuing defacement of tombstones in Jewish cemeteries throughout Germany; the overturning of camp memorials in Buchenwald and elsewhere; and, most ominously, a growth in violent assaults against foreigners and others deemed by neo-Nazi groups to be appropriate targets of racial hatred. These assaults have become increasingly vicious, and some have resulted in the brutal deaths of foreign-born workers and refugees seeking asylum in Germany. While German officials and others take these events seriously and have repeatedly spoken out against them, there are segments of the German population that seem content to remain passive. In light of these developments,

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Amir Eshel's critique of Martin Walser's affirmation of the sovereignty of individual conscience and, when so moved, his inclination to "look away" from troubling images of the past is of more than academic interest. For, as Professor Eshel rightly says, such occurrences point to the importance of sustaining a well-informed and morally responsible public memory, without which individual conscience runs the risk of becoming a merely private matter and also an ineffective one.

In addition to offering us "Jewish Memories, German Futures," Amir Eshel presented a second Paul Lecture on the writings of Paul Celan. Speaking on the Bloomington campus of Indiana University on September 20, 2000, Professor Eshel discussed the connections between Celan's poetics and his ethics, especially as these find expression in the author's important prose text *Der Meridian*.

By offering us these two illuminating lectures, Professor Eshel helps to advance the aims of the Paul Program, which seeks to foster ongoing scholarly research into the complex interrelationships between German history and Jewish history broadly conceived.

The Dorit and Gerald Paul Program for the Study of Germans and Jews was established in 1986. Under the terms of the Paul Program, we regularly invite to the Bloomington campus of Indiana University scholars from Germany and elsewhere whose professional work involves them in serious study of German-Jewish interconnections. The first of these scholars was Professor Johann N. Schmidt, of Hamburg University, who delivered a lecture in the fall of 1986 entitled "'Those Unfortunate Years': Nazism in the Public Debate of Postwar Germany." Our second Paul Fellow was Professor Michael Brocke, of the University in Duisburg, who was with us in the fall of 1988 and addressed the following topic: "German-Jewish Symbiosis: Did it Ever Really Exist?" Professor Micha Brumlik, of the University of Heidelberg, visited Bloomington in the fall of 1990 and spoke on "The Situation of the Jews in Today's Germany." In the fall of 1992, Dr. Frank Stern, of Ben Gurion University, Israel, spoke about "Jews in the Minds of Germans in the Postwar Period." The fifth Paul Fellow, in 1994, was Professor Gertrud Koch, of the Ruhr University, Bochum, who presented a lecture on "Jewish Characters in Postwar German Film." In 1998, Professor Dieter Lamping, of Johannes Gutenberg University, Mainz, spoke on "The Representation of Jews in Postwar German Literature." Professor Amir Eshel, our most recent Paul Fellow, continues this distinguished line of visiting scholars.

My colleagues and I in the Robert A. and Sandra S. Borns Jewish Studies Program at Indiana University are extremely grateful to Dorit and Gerald Paul for enabling us to establish the program that bears their

names. It will give us the opportunity in the years to come to continue a research program of the highest quality in one of the most compelling areas of modern cultural history.

Alvin H. Rosenfeld, Director  
The Robert A. and Sandra S. Borns Jewish Studies Program  
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## *Jewish Memories, German Futures: Recent Debates in Germany about the Past*

July 5th, 1998 was a sunny day in Hamburg, Germany. Together with my wife, I stood at the bathroom window of our apartment watching a truck carrying our belongings as it rumbled down the street. Looking at the rolling truck that was gradually vanishing from our sight, I couldn't help but think back on the past eight years that I had spent there on Opitz Street. I clearly remember asking myself what it is that shapes one's memories of a house, a street, a city in which one has lived. Usually, I thought, the decisive memories are the most private ones: the family occasions, the personal events, and the smells. One remembers the shadows cast by the trees, the flowers, and the bushes; one recalls the faces of people encountered on a daily basis.

Yet, in my case—as an Israeli who had arrived in Germany ten years before, naïvely wanting to solve the haunting questions of the German past—things were different. For me, it seemed that the heavy truck, which had already disappeared from view, also carried with it my memories of the moving historical period that I was fortunate enough to have witnessed first-hand over the past years. During this time, the Cold War ended and Germany was reunited. In the house on Opitz Street, I listened to my short wave radio carrying news reports from Israel, while anti-coalition demonstrations simultaneously swept the streets of Germany during the Gulf War. These were the years of riots against foreigners and the fierce debate over Daniel Jonah Goldhagen's book, *Hitler's Willing Executioners*.<sup>1</sup> It was a time of intense public discussion over the planned Holocaust memorial in Berlin, and much more.

To be certain, the common and universal experience of taking leave of rather intimate and personal moments before moving out of a house one has lived in was, for me, enmeshed with larger collective, transpersonal, historical memories. In that moment, the pointed words of the late, great Jewish historian Amos Funkenstein came to mind. In his discussion of the nature of collective memory, Funkenstein noted that even the most personal memory cannot be removed from its social—and I would say historical—context.<sup>2</sup>

About three months after this sunny day—it was now October of

1998—I had occasion to revisit Funkenstein's thesis. Sitting then in my office at Stanford University, thousands of miles away from Germany, I was reading an article in a German daily. The report was dedicated to one of the premiere events in Germany's annual cultural calendar: the annual awarding of the distinguished Peace Prize, given by the German Publishers' Association. I read that, in his acceptance speech, the acknowledged laureate, one of the most eminent postwar German writers, Martin Walser, addressed the place of the Holocaust in the German public sphere. Martin Walser had chosen to tackle this familiar topic from the perspective of Germany's most recent history—the 1989 reunification. Over the course of Walser's speech, the audience in the historic St. Paul's Church in Frankfurt heard the distinguished author say that he sometimes is forced to simply turn away when images depicting the extermination of the Jews during the Holocaust are shown in the media. According to Walser, such pictures have become part of an almost daily routine of accusation aimed at Germans, a bitter pill that he, Walser, was no longer willing to swallow.

Seated in the audience in St. Paul's Church was Ignatz Bubis, then Chair of the Central Committee of Jews in Germany. I read that, a day after Walser's speech, Bubis had issued a statement accusing Martin Walser of "spiritual arson" ("geistige Brandstiftung"). Bubis' response sparked the beginning of the so-called Walser-Bubis debate, arguably the fiercest post-reunification dispute between Germans and Jews.

How is it possible that such a distinguished writer would utter these opinions from the podium of St. Paul's Church? How is it possible that neither during nor after the ceremony no one except Ignatz Bubis questioned Walser's theses? What led Ignatz Bubis to call the prominent writer's speech an act of "spiritual arson"? And, most importantly, what can we learn about German identity from this intense dispute regarding the relationship between Germans and Jews? In order to answer these questions, I would like to take you on a journey through time, back to Germany in the fall months of 1998. My thesis is that this debate and other debates regarding Germany's past illustrate not only the divergent memories of Germans and Jews on the subject of the Holocaust but also reflect the emergence of a new, post-reunification German national identity.

Both the awards ceremony in the historic St. Paul's Church in Frankfurt and the ensuing Walser-Bubis debate should be viewed in conjunction with other moments in German postwar history in which questions of Holocaust commemoration and the German-Jewish dialogue were fiercely argued in the public sphere.<sup>3</sup> Yet, what differentiates the so-

called Walser-Bubis debate from earlier such happenings is the point in time at which the previous debates occurred: with the imminent governmental relocation to Berlin, the process of national reunification reached one of its symbolic zeniths. In the autumn months of 1998, with the departure of most governmental offices from Bonn and the reinstatement of Berlin as the German capital, it seemed that a new phase could begin in the general debate about the place of National Socialism in the consciousness of the German state. The Walser-Bubis debate thus highlights the manner in which at least a portion of the German intellectual and political elite would prefer to reshape the story of the past and its role in the public sphere in order to tailor it to Germany's new role in post-Cold War Europe.

Let us now turn our eyes and clocks back to Frankfurt am Main in October 1998. We see a hall crowded with the political, economic, and cultural German elite: the German president, members of the city council, publishers, and bankers are sitting quietly, waiting to hear the introductory remarks about writer Martin Walser from Frank Schirrmacher, the distinguished feuilleton editor of Germany's leading daily newspaper, the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*. In my opinion, the debate began here: Frank Schirrmacher portrayed Walser and his generation as people who could affirm their childhoods only with great difficulty because "the memory of their childhood can almost never be reconciled with the present knowledge of the crimes committed outside of the sandbox."<sup>4</sup>

What is noteworthy about Schirrmacher's characterization concerns the stylization of this particular generation as "children in the sandbox." Did not Martin Walser, like many of his generation, voluntarily register for service in the *Wehrmacht*?<sup>5</sup> Schirrmacher's praise is even more striking because he had just lauded Walser's political views as a poetic form: "Walser's politics stand on poetic feet.... That Walser wanted to rehabilitate the nation, put the inflation of the fascism accusation out of commission, awaken the sense of history—this occurred out of artistic necessity: it occurred because otherwise he would have had to lie about himself."<sup>6</sup>

After Frank Schirrmacher had paved the way for Walser, the prizewinner took the podium. In his acceptance speech, Walser took up Schirrmacher's theses but went one step further on the road toward rehabilitating the German sense of history. Walser introduced his thoughts by speaking of an eminent German "thinker" and an "equally eminent poet." These two—the reference was to the Austrian writer Peter Handke and the philosopher Juergen Habermass—propagated the political demoralization of the German nation. The "poet" mocked by Walser is said to have spoken of his observations, in a Salzburg restaurant, of people who dreamt

only of extermination and gas chambers. Year after year, Walser continued, such statements accumulate and thus call forth the question of why this reality does not present itself in such a manner to him. Walser said: "Does it have to do with my conscience that is too easily put to sleep? [liegt es an meinem zu leicht einzuschlafernden Gewissen?]"<sup>7</sup>

When the media report about asylum homes for new immigrants that are set aflame by Germans who do not want foreigners in Germany and about a portion of the German public that is sympathetic to such events; when writers and thinkers speak of symbolic politics and of souls that are unresponsive in the face of the burning asylum homes and the sausage stands set up in front of them; he, Walser, is unable to agree: "I have an unsubstantiated hunch: those who come forth with such statements want to hurt us because they feel we have earned it. They probably want to wound themselves as well. But mainly us. Everyone. With one restriction: every German."<sup>8</sup> In Walser's portrayal, the "true" victims are not the asylum seekers in the burning homes, but "we," the accused Germans. The injurious talk to which "all Germans" are exposed finds its equivalent in the media's campaign of remembrance, according to Walser, because "the Germans" are constantly confronted with pictures of their shame via the "continual presentation" of the mass murder that took place under National Socialism. Walser turns his attention to the disseminators of such pictures and empty words and says: "Something inside of me wants to defend itself against this continual presentation of our shame. Instead of being thankful for its constant presentation, I begin to look away."<sup>9</sup> At this point, the author diverges noticeably from the guilt complex and self-examination that still characterized his position in *Auschwitz and No End* (*Auschwitz und kein Ende*) (1979). Then, looking away was not valid; instead, the necessity of viewing was: "We freed ourselves too soon. In the face of Auschwitz images, each one of us can experience it: we *must* allow the process to go on. For life. I would always much rather *look away* from these pictures. I have to force myself to look at them. And I know how I must force myself."<sup>10</sup> In other words, viewing was still the thing to do in 1979. Today, though, in 1998, almost ten years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, this *must*, this imperative necessity, which is not derived from the images themselves, is only barely still applicable. Now, seeing more clearly than others implies uncovering the real, that is '*foreign*,' motives behind the continual circulation of the ritualized language of Auschwitz and presenting the truth to the audience. The motives behind the pervasive representation of these images lie not in the need to remember, per se, but elsewhere, namely in the compulsion of the conscience to focus on "present objectives."

Up to this point in his speech, Walser repeated the familiar pattern of a particular discourse: Heinrich Böll already determined in 1962 that "on the tremendous guilt" an "equally tremendous *credit*" (my emphasis, A.E.) has followed that in turn becomes a "letter of defense" and is exploited by unnamed "realists."<sup>11</sup> At this juncture, Walser completed a decisive argumentative turn. Because his speech strove not only for a critique of "instrumentalization," toward questions of adequate representation, but more so toward the conscience: just as in 1977, when he predicted the end of the country's division—"we must keep the wound called Germany open"—he, Walser, still stands today "trembling like back then" and says: "Auschwitz is not suited to becoming a routine threat, a medium of intimidation to be used at any time, or moral weapon, or even only an exercise of duty. What results through ritualization is mere lip-service."<sup>12</sup> If 1977 and 1998 can be viewed as an analogy, *then* and *now*, Auschwitz does not represent "the wound." The remembrance of and reflection upon these events, precisely in public forums, should not persist. Moreover, the chronic injury inflicted by the moral weapon called Auschwitz must be healed, and the rituals of memory must cease. Proceeding from the philosophy of Martin Heidegger, Martin Walser then completes his decisive argumentative turn: no one should involve himself in questions of other people's consciences. Especially with respect to the memory of National Socialist crimes, "[a] good conscience is none at all. Each person is alone with his own conscience."<sup>13</sup>

Here it becomes clear that Walser's literary and political views are closely intertwined. His thesis that "each person is alone with his own conscience" is directly related to his autobiographical novel *Ein springender Brunnen*, (*A Spouting Fountain*), which was published in 1998. In this novel, Walser tells of his childhood during the National Socialist years for the first time. He writes: "In the past that is possessed collectively by everyone, one can *walk about* as if in a museum. The *personal* past is not accessible."<sup>14</sup> Several months after the release of this biographical text, Walser states in his acceptance speech at St. Paul's Church: "Being guilty belongs to life itself" and "A good conscience is none at all. Each person is alone with his own conscience." The pretense to view the personal past as one *not to be reflected upon* or criticized and the determination to keep conscience from being examined in depth compose a unity. Both result in the enthronement of a subjectivity that excludes any form of critical social discourse. Here, one can hardly imagine a more divergent position than that of Amos Funkenstein. While Funkenstein emphasizes that even the most personal memory cannot be removed from its social context, Walser seeks freedom from the weight of the past in the theory of a completely

private, inaccessible form of memory and in the solitary nature of the conscience. Certainly, there remains no room here for a dialogue with others on the subject of ethics.

After Walser finished his speech, a majority of the audience rose and thanked the author with clearly audible ovations. However, not everyone present in the hall stood up. Ignatz Bubis, the President of the Central Committee of Jews in Germany, was in attendance with his wife at this event. He did not rise to applaud Walser, and on the following day, he registered his critical opinion in a press release that referred to Martin Walser's speech as "spiritual arson" ("Geistige Brandstiftung").

Bubis' polemic triggered a months-long debate in which two completely incompatible positions collided. On one side stood Walser and his defenders, who demanded the right to *personal* memory and the *solitary* conscience; on the other side stood Walser's critics—primarily Jews—who insisted on the priority of a culture of memory and who have always understood the past as eternally present. For them, it held true as before that the past never disappears completely, and that, in particular, Germany's Nazi past remains—and must remain—all the more an immanent piece of the present. Likewise, they emphasized that on no account can the conscience be abstracted from its social context and that the German public has an irreversible moral duty to always hold present such images of the past.

But this debate cannot be characterized only by incompatible traditions of cultural remembrance. It is distinguished much more by a tendency toward hermeticism within German public discourse. With that I mean the latent or open assumption that those who took Walser's theses outside of the realm of expected interpretation were not even in a position to understand them *correctly*—a position that leads to the actual exclusion of the memory and conscience of others. When Martin Walser received word of Bubis' criticism, he said simply: "Apparently he did not listen properly. I can explain it to him again in private."<sup>15</sup> Walter Jens, one of the foremost German literary scholars, commented that Bubis had just "misunderstood" Walser.<sup>16</sup> Another eminent critic, Dieter Borchmeyer, said that Walser did not want to recite his speech, but let his address speak for him: "This is precisely what those inexperienced with *literary speaking* did not grasp."<sup>17</sup> Rudolf Augstein, publisher of the renowned weekly magazine *Der Spiegel*, alleged that Bubis demonstrated "a thorough lack of power of judgment" and thus aligned himself with the "fringes of society."<sup>18</sup>

Several weeks later, on the evening of November 9, 1998—the anniversary of the so-called *Kristallnacht*—Ignatz Bubis delivered a

speech in which he reconfirmed his interpretation of Walser's comments. The previously mentioned, prominent daily, *FAZ*, responded promptly to Bubis' interpretation of Martin Walser's words: "With this, a depressing low point of political remembrance has been reached." After all, Walser's speech had warned of "repression through an excess of forced memory."<sup>19</sup> Yet, at this point one has to raise the question: Who is forcing whom? Is it, perhaps, as Walser thinks, "the media"? It is precisely this that the most influential of all German dailies claimed. A while later, in the same newspaper, Frank Schirrmacher wrote that since Walser's speech "a collective German lesson for natives" had been taking place. "He who learns German learns no colloquial speech."<sup>20</sup> That is, he who interprets Martin Walser's language *differently* places himself outside of the national discourse, at least for the time being.

The talk of "a German lesson for natives" makes it even more understandable why Ignatz Bubis, in a subsequent *Spiegel* commentary entitled "Did you understand Walser correctly?," claimed to have sensed anti-Semitism in the subtext of the debate.<sup>21</sup> For, in the antisemitic discourse of the 19th and 20th centuries, the Jew—among others—was known as not fully commanding the German language. At that time, references to the "jüdelnden,"—"jabbering Jews"—were part of commonplace speech.<sup>22</sup> In the autumn weeks of 1998, the jabbering Jew of then seems to have acquired a younger brother, who still cannot properly understand the subtleties of the German language and needs after-school tutoring as a result.

It is notable that during the debate other prominent public figures in addition to Ignatz Bubis—most of them Jews—understood Walser's speech differently than Walser claims to have meant it: the historians Saul Friedländer, Moshe Zuckermann, and Michael Brenner; authors like Elie Wiesel, Louis Begley, Esther Dischereit, Guenter Kunert, Elfriede Jelinek, and others.<sup>23</sup> Their interpretation of Walser's position focused on the wording of his speech, in addition to the interweaving of public rhetoric, social symbolism, and gestures to which Walser's speech and contributions to the previously cited debate belong. In light of the restrictive forms of public address, the criticism of many of the important public personages who responded to Walser is linked to Gershom Scholem's still-valid analysis of the absent dialogue between Germans and Jews: "In a dialogue there must be two parties that listen to one another, that are prepared to validate and respond to the other for who he is and what he represents" (my emphasis, A. E.).<sup>24</sup>

To be certain, these figures, like Bubis, immediately recognized the texture of the social discourse in post-1989 Germany. After all, in the everyday life of the new Berlin Republic, in which Ignatz Bubis lived until

recently (he died in 1999), people will go to any length to silence their opponents, during debates such as the Walser-Bubis debate. Thus, at the climax of the conflict—early December 1998—a pig labeled BUBIS was driven onto Alexanderplatz in Berlin.<sup>25</sup> This was no isolated event: in the same month, Heinz Galinski's gravestone was desecrated for the second time in very recent memory. On November 10, 1998, the Jewish memorial in Tiergarten, Berlin became the target of vandals. One day later, similar offences occurred at the Holocaust memorial in Bremen. And, as one can observe even of late, the everyday life of the new Berlin Republic continues to be punctuated by outbursts of hatred against foreigners and Jewish facilities, foremost among them Jewish cemeteries. With his polemical charge that Walser's speech was "spiritual arson," Bubis wanted also to react to this reality, which finds distant resonance not least of all in the rhetoric of public discourse. Even if Bubis hit the wrong note in his search for an apt metaphor, he set into motion a debate that revealed precisely that reality—in all its potential for violence—to which he wanted to draw attention: the attacks against Jews, immigrant workers, and others that were occurring with alarming frequency.

Although it had been carried out with such intensity, the Walser-Bubis conflict died out with relatively little attention. Shortly before Christmas, on December 13, 1998, Ignatz Bubis and Martin Walser met for a discussion organized by the FAZ. Bubis, then already visibly ill, attempted to explain his failed polemic by stating the social responsibility of the writer and, in the end, retracted his accusation about "spiritual arson." According to Bubis, Walser had made clear to him that he, Bubis, had misunderstood Walser, who elucidated what he had really intended the meaning to be. Only reluctantly was Martin Walser willing to admit that he had ever given expression to forgetting. Yet, he did not concede in the least on the positions he put forth in his speech. With reference to the flood of affirmative letters he received from readers over the course of the debate, Walser dismissed the possibility that his speech could have been misconstrued. To Ignatz Bubis, the Shoah survivor whose father perished in Treblinka, Walser directed the following words: "Mr. Bubis, I must tell you that while I was occupying myself in this field [this reference is to remembrance of the Holocaust], you were occupied with other things."<sup>26</sup>

"Occupied with other things": Walser is unmistakably playing on Bubis' Frankfurt real estate ventures of the 1960s and 1970s. No wonder, then, that Ignatz Bubis did not in any way retract his basic analysis of German society in the late 1990s, even after the reconciliatory meeting. Several times he gave consideration to the thought that now, after the debate, "the people" could finally express that which previously would

have been said only under oath. Shortly before his death on August 13, 1999, Bubis reflected on his conflict with the Walser camp and on the discourse of memory in Germany and debates surrounding the construction of the Holocaust memorial in Berlin. He said the following: "Today's generation of politicians would like to turn the whole thing back to a gentle Walser-Tour (*moechte auf eine sanfte Walser-Tour das Ganze zurueckdrehen*).... A whole string of elected officials who voted for the Berlin memorial thought so too (...). There was the opinion: Let that finally be the end of it. Just build the memorial! Let's get it over with! Only for the Jews. Okay, now let's step away from the table!"<sup>27</sup>

Ignatz Bubis' differentiation of *before and after the debate* points to a marked tendency. Although an "epidemic of commemoration," as Michal Bodemann observed, has existed in Germany since the 1970s, both the Walser-Bubis debate and the conflict over the Berlin memorial show that this "epidemic" has not resulted in any conscious change in the opinions of most Germans toward concrete events of the past.<sup>28</sup> With regard to the caesura of 1989, the so-called Jenninger Debacle (1988), which occurred in the Bundestag's session devoted to the 50th anniversary of the *Kristallnacht*, serves as a clarifying point of reference. Then, Philipp Jenninger's crude historical perspective, which focused on the perpetrators and ignored the victims save for vague gestures of perplexity, had immediate negative political consequences. Although the cool tone of the speech was mistaken, Jenninger was forced to resign and subsequently disappeared from the public arena.<sup>29</sup> Ten years after this particular wave of public indignation, Martin Walser centered his speech in the same manner on the perpetrators and their children. This observation is not meant to conjure up past events but rather to advocate the necessity for a new narrative and a free discourse of memory. That no clear public opposition resulted from Walser's presentation—at least in the days immediately following his speech—points directly to an ever-growing desire for an approach different from the Federal Republic's pre-reunification historical narrative. It also reflects the need for a departure from hackneyed forms of speech, which allowed the mention of the "instrumentalization of memory for sound material profit" to occur "only under a reproachful hand."<sup>30</sup>

Martin Walser's wish that his own story, his own account of history, remain untouched and that his conscience be left alone in its supposed *solitude* is, in this context, less interesting than the broad agreement that Walser received with these statements. This agreement and many other related events in recent years point to the audible wish of large segments of the German public to finally be able to live "freely"—that is, guiltlessly—

a decade after the fall of the Wall and the achievement of unrestricted political freedom. Aside from the innumerable readers' letters that he received, a hardly-noticed statement by the German Chancellor, Gerhard Schroeder, bears witness to Walser's observation that his address was interpreted as "freeing the conscience" of the land. In an interview with the weekly newspaper *Die Zeit*, given shortly after the Walser-Bubis debate, the Chancellor said: "People who have no memory of their own—that applies to my generation and the generations that follow—should be able to *walk about* free of guilt complexes."<sup>31</sup> What is noteworthy here is not the self-evident expectation that innocent people be able to live without feelings of guilt, but the assertion of a leading politician, one who grew up in a country full of perceptible traces of its immediate past, that he and his generation have no memory of their own at all.

The Walser-Bubis debate and the ongoing, more general, debate on Holocaust remembrance in Germany clearly show how, ten years after reunification, all attempts to develop a new national self-understanding are geared with oppressive seriousness toward acquittal. Similar to the criticism of "bourgeois libertarian to psychopathic antifascism" by a younger German author, Botho Strauss, Walser's view also focused on the hope for a new, guilt-free relation to German history.<sup>32</sup> This longing to "normalize" the past characterizes even more recent events—e.g., the awarding of a prize by one of the funds of the Konrad Adenauer Foundation to the revisionist historian Ernst Nolte for what was called "his life work."<sup>33</sup> Instead of comprehending the birth of the new Berlin Republic as the departure point of a new determination—also with respect to the remembrance of the murdered Jews—large portions of the German public insist, so it seems, on the supposed absence of memory, which in turn should verify the nation's collective innocence. Instead of debating the possible future of a diverse society in which people with sometimes quite contradictory memories and values live, one dreams of the "rehabilitation" of the nation as a whole from the "accusation of fascism," as it was termed in Frank Schirrmacher's introductory address.

In his 1998 Paul Lecture, Professor Dieter Lamping observed rightly that a steadily growing interest in all things Jewish exists in Germany, an interest that I was able to follow closely during my years in Hamburg.<sup>34</sup> I would venture to question, however, whether this growing interest necessarily can be equated with the true readiness of large segments of the German populace to shape the present without exclusion of the German past. It seems to me that the Walser-Bubis debate and the events that followed it point more significantly to a growing fatigue with the presence of the Holocaust. This fatigue also has an effect on the preparedness of

people to acknowledge and treat the memories of German-Jewish citizens with respect. In his 1992 Paul Lecture, Frank Stern prophesied that the future will show the Jewish view of the past to be more and more antagonistic to that of many Germans.<sup>35</sup> In light of the conflict over the Berlin Holocaust memorial, Salomon Korn, the Frankfurt architect and representative of the Jewish Council, accurately observed: "In Germany, there is still a divided memory of the Holocaust."<sup>36</sup> For Jews and non-Jews alike, Salomon Korn sees that even—and perhaps especially—after 1989, a sincere rapprochement and lasting togetherness are only possible in the consciousness of those who remain detached. Yet, the conflicts surrounding both the Wehrmacht war crimes exhibit and the Berlin memorial show that a public fixation on issues of symbolic representation only paralyzes any chance to have earnest debate about the proper form of German national identity in connection with the past.<sup>37</sup>

Two years ago, in September 1998, an American moving truck pulled into the parking lot of my apartment complex in Menlo Park, California. In the belly of this giant truck were the things that my family and I had packed up just several weeks before. Over the course of the days that followed, I found myself peeking often into the boxes where I kept my collection of clippings from German newspapers. Many of these articles suddenly seemed far removed. The constant conflict over the German past that I experienced while still in Germany seemed to have abated slightly with the distance. Here in America, the media occupy themselves with Germany from the perspectives of rising unemployment and the imminent introduction of the common European currency, the Euro. I almost could have thought that in the future I would only ever read about Germany's role in an increasingly globalized world, that the formative process of a new German identity would proceed quietly and be inclusive of all peoples living in Germany. But shortly thereafter came the Walser-Bubis debate, and it demonstrated exactly how inseparably all of these themes—the process of European unity, globalization, and the complex emergence of a new German national identity—are tied to questions of how Germans regard themselves in relation to their past and how German society as a whole perceives the memories and emotions of others.

In order to avoid giving the impression that the German public's dealing with their nation's past is unified, I want to clearly emphasize that the desire for a present free of the past, even after 1989, is not shared by all. Right and left of the political spectrum are not categories especially suited to characterize the discussion of memory. Frank Schirrmacher, of the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, stands in contrast to an outstanding journalist like Thomas Assheuer, of the weekly *Die Zeit*. In addition to many

younger German-language authors who do *not* want to occupy themselves with the National Socialist history, one can name many authors who *do* address these themes seriously. But in considering the post-1989 pressure for a new approach to history, the debate about memory since then demonstrates that all attempts to turn the gaze away from German history lead only treacherously to an even more critical eye being cast consistently on the past by foreign and domestic observers alike. Generations that follow will one day be able to look back on debates such as the Walser-Bubis debate and see what happens when there are people who feel themselves responsible to speak for the consciences of others. Until then, Germany's neighbor states and especially Jews in and outside of Germany will follow the German debates with anticipation and take an active role in them. Even the most recent conflict, which arose this year around the awarding of the Konrad Adenauer Prize to Ernst Nolte, shows that neither the representation of the events nor memory and conscience can be matters of the solitary, ever-guilty individual. Rather, the latest wave of anti-immigrant assaults in the former East Germany, the increasing brutality of the nationalistic party NPD, and the explosion on July 27, 2000 in a Düsseldorf subway station that injured ten people, several of them members of the Jewish community—all of these occurrences point to the importance of public memory and an open social discourse. Even if many Germans, especially after 1989, tend to proclaim the end of their country's traumatic history, they are still required to convince their Jewish partners in this history of this end. For, in this relationship and in the inability to remove oneself from it, history in no way belongs exclusively to the perpetrators and to future generations that will succeed them. Without consideration of the silent victims, no person can escape the terrible link that was created between Germans and Jews in Auschwitz. As the German-Jewish author Barbara Honigmann recently noted: "Sometimes it seems to me as if this inability to separate from each other is only now being recognized as the so-often confirmed German-Jewish symbiosis. Because in Auschwitz the Germans and the Jews became a pair that even death itself cannot part."<sup>38</sup>

<sup>1</sup> For further information on the debate over Daniel Jonah Goldhagen's book *Hitler's Willing Executioners*, see Robert R. Shandley (ed.): *Unwilling Germans?: The Goldhagen Debate*, with essays translated by Jeremiah Riemer. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998.

<sup>2</sup> Amos Funkenstein, *Perceptions of Jewish History*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993, 4.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Klaus Briegleb, *Unmittelbar zur Epoche des NS-Faschismus*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1989, 33. Such moments of fierce debate were, for example, the visit by the American president Ronald Reagan to the war cemetery near the city of Bitburg (1985) and the debate preceding the Gulf War. In such moments, so it seems, the very essence on which the German-Jewish dialogue has been based since 1945 is in jeopardy.

<sup>4</sup> Frank Schirrmacher, Sein Anteil Laudatio. In: *Friedenspreis des Deutschen Buchhandels 1998: Martin Walser*, Frankfurt am Main, 1998, 26.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Martin Walser in interview with Rudolf Augstein, *Der Spiegel* (45/1998).

<sup>6</sup> Frank Schirrmacher, Sein Anteil Laudatio, 32.

<sup>7</sup> Martin Walser, Dank: Erfahrungen beim Verfaßen einer Sonntagsrede, *Friedenspreis des Deutschen Buchhandels 1998: Martin Walser*, Frankfurt am Main, 1998, 43.

<sup>8</sup> Martin Walser, Dank: Erfahrungen beim Verfaßen einer Sonntagsrede, 44.

<sup>9</sup> Martin Walser, Dank: Erfahrungen beim Verfaßen einer Sonntagsrede, 45.

<sup>10</sup> Martin Walser, *Auschwitz und kein Ende*, *Werke in zwölf Bänden*, Helmuth Kiesel (ed.), Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1997, XI, 633.

<sup>11</sup> Heinrich Böll, *Porträt eines Rabbiners Zum Problem der Juden im Nachkriegsdeutschland*, in: Hans Werner Richter, *Bestandaufnahme. Eine deutsche Bilanz 1962*, München/Wien/Basel: K. Desch, 1962, 196-199.

<sup>12</sup> Martin Walser, Dank: Erfahrungen beim Verfaßen einer Sonntagsrede, 46.

<sup>13</sup> Martin Walser, Dank: Erfahrungen beim Verfaßen einer Sonntagsrede, 48.

- <sup>14</sup> Martin Walser, *Ein springender Brunnen*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1998, 9.
- <sup>15</sup> Cf. Klaus von Dohnanyi, Eine Friedensrede. Martin Walsers notwendige Klage, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (14. November 1998).
- <sup>16</sup> A report in the daily *Berliner Morgenpost* (17 October 1998).
- <sup>17</sup> Dieter Borchmeyer, Von der politischen Rede des Dichter Heinrich Heine – Thomas Mann – Martin Walser, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (30 Januar 1999).
- <sup>18</sup> Rudolf Augstein, „Wir sind alle verletztbar, *Der Spiegel* (49/1998).
- <sup>19</sup> Cf. Deprimierend (Commentary), *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (10. November 1998).
- <sup>20</sup> Frank Schirrmacher, Seelenarbeit, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (28 November 1998).
- <sup>21</sup> Moral verjährt nicht Ignatz Bubis über die Auschwitz-Debatte und seine Auseinandersetzung mit Martin Walser und Klaus von Dohnanyi, in *Der Spiegel* (49/1998).
- <sup>22</sup> Cf. Christoph Daxelmüller, Das 'Mauscheln', in: Julius H. Schoeps, Joachim Schlör (ed.), *Antisemitismus: Vorurteile und Mythen*, München/Zürich: Piper, 1995, 143-152.
- <sup>23</sup> See Saul Friedländer, Die Metapher des Bösen: Über Martin Walsers Friedenspreis-Rede und die Aufgabe der Erinnerung, *Die Zeit* (49/1998); Louis Begley, Die Gräber sind noch immer offen, *Die Zeit* (53/1998); Elie Wiesel, Ohne Schande. Offener Brief von Elie Wiesel an Martin Walser, *Die Zeit* (51/98); Günter Kunert, Der heitere Melancholiker, *Die Zeit* (53/1998); Michael Brenner, Sie sind unser Unglück: Der neue alte Antisemitismusstreit, *Süddeutsche Zeitung* (21. December 1998); Esther Dischereit, Wie ich hinsehe: Warum Martin Walsers Geschichte eigentlich steinalt ist, *Frankfurter Rundschau* (3. December 1998); Moshe Zuckermann widerspricht Martin Walser, *Frankfurter Rundschau* (28. November 1998); Elfriede Jelinek, Die Instrumente stimmen, *Die Gemeinde* (Wien, November 1998).
- <sup>24</sup> Gershom Scholem, Wider den Mythos vom deutsch-jüdischen Gespräch, in Manfred Schlösser (ed.), *Auf gespaltenem Pfad. Für Margarete Susman*, Darmstadt: Erato Presse, 1964, 229.

- <sup>25</sup> See Evelyn Roll, Ein Schwein kennt doch keine Scham, *Süddeutsche Zeitung* (7 December 1998).
- <sup>26</sup> See Wir brauchen eine neue Sprache für die Erinnerung: Das Treffen von Ignatz Bubis und Martin Walser, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (14. December 1998).
- <sup>27</sup> Ein bißchen Antisemitismus ist befreiend: Ein Interview mit Ignatz Bubis, *Süddeutsche Zeitung* (24 December 1998).
- <sup>28</sup> Michal Bodemann, "Eclipse of Memory: German Representations of Auschwitz in the Early Postwar Period," *New Germanic Critique*, Fall 1998, 57-89; here: 60.
- <sup>29</sup> See Klaus Briegleb, Vorbemerkung am 11. November 1988, in: ders., *Unmittelbar zur Epoche des NS-Faschismus Arbeiten zur politischen Philologie 1978-1988*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1989, 11-28, and Elisabeth Domansky, "Kristallnacht, the Holocaust and German Unity: The Meaning of November 9 as an Anniversary in Germany," *History and Memory*, Vol. 4, No. 1, Spring/Summer 1992, 60-94.
- <sup>30</sup> See Elisabeth Domansky, Die gespaltene Erinnerung, in: Manuel Köppen (ed.), *Kunst und Literatur nach Auschwitz*, Tübingen 1993, 178-196.
- <sup>31</sup> Eine offene Republik: Ein Interview mit Gerhard Schröder, *Die Zeit* (6/1999).
- <sup>32</sup> Cf. Botho Strauss, Anschwellender Bocksgesang, in: Heimo Schwillk, Ulrich Schacht (eds.), *Die selbstbewusste Nation*. Frankfurt am Main/Berlin: Ullstein, 1994, 26.
- <sup>33</sup> The renowned German historian Ernst Nolte published on June 6, 1986, in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, an essay called "Vergangenheit, die nicht vergehen will." In this essay, Nolte argued that it is time to rethink the theory of German collective guilt and to view the Holocaust in the "broader" context of other major crimes of the 20th century such as the Russian Gulag system. The Holocaust and the Third Reich should thus, according to Nolte, lose their unique status in modern history and be reconsidered as a sign of the times. It was this, at its core revisionist essay, and the answer to it by the philosopher Juergen Habermass, which sparked the epochal historians' debate (*Historikerstreit*) in Germany (1986-1987) and led to Nolte's long intellectual isolation in Germany. For further information, see James Knowlton and Truett Cates (trans.), *Historikerstreit. Forever in the Shadow of Hitler? Original Documents of the Historikerstreit, the Controversy Concerning the Singularity of the Holocaust*, Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Humanities Press, 1993.

<sup>34</sup> Dieter Lamping, "Today's Germany and the Jews" in: The Dorit and Gerald Paul Program for the Study of Germans and Jews, Bloomington: The Robert A. and Sandra S. Borns Jewish Studies Program at Indiana University, 1998, 5-13.

<sup>35</sup> Cf Frank Stern, "Jews in the Minds of Germans in the Postwar Period." in: The Dorit and Gerald Paul Program for the Study of Germans and Jews, Bloomington: The Robert A. and Sandra S. Borns Jewish Studies Program at Indiana University, 1993, 16.

<sup>36</sup> Salomon Korn, *Geteilte Erinnerung Beiträe zur 'deutsch-juedischen' Gegenwart*, Berlin: Philo Verlag 1999, 199 ff, and 219-245.

<sup>37</sup> The Wehrmacht war crimes exhibit was organized in the mid 1990s by the Hamburg-based Institute for Social Research (*Hamburger Institut für Sozialforschung*). It brought together numerous photos and texts proving that the mass murder of Jews during the Holocaust was not carried out just by the SS and politically motivated Nazis in the occupied territories but also by 'simple' German Wehrmacht soldiers of all ranks and units. The exhibition thus questioned the notion that the Jewish genocide was enacted by the few, whereas the majority of Germans and the bulk of the German army remained faithful to the universal military dignity code. The exhibition was shown in all major German cities and drew a lot of attention but also fierce dispute over its premises. After some pictures shown in this exhibition proved to have originated from crimes committed by Russian soldiers rather than Germans, the Hamburg-based Institute pulled the exhibition back for a thorough examination. See also: *Hamburger Institut für Sozialforschung* (ed.), *Vernichtungskrieg: Verbrechen der Wehrmacht 1941 bis 1944: Ausstellungskatalog*; [with essays by Bernd Boll ... et al.], Hamburg: *Hamburger Institut für Sozialforschung*, 1996, and Landeshauptstadt München (ed.), *Bilanz einer Ausstellung: Dokumentation der Kontroverse um die Ausstellung "Vernichtungskrieg – Verbrechen der Wehrmacht 1941 bis 1944*, München: Knaur 1998.

<sup>38</sup> Barbara Honigmann, *Damals, dann und danach*, München/Wien: Carl Hanser Verlag 1999, 16.



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