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# Rethinking Empathy: Emotions triggered by the Holocaust among Muslim-minority in Germany

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## Abstract

In the last decade there has been widely shared discomfort about the way Muslim minority Germans engage with the Holocaust. They are accused of not showing empathy towards its Jewish victims and, as a result, of not being able to learn the necessary lessons from this massive crime. By focusing on instances in which the emotional reactions of Muslim minority Germans towards the Holocaust are judged as not empathetic enough and morally wrong, this article explores how Holocaust education and contemporary understandings of empathy, in teaching about the worst manifestation of racism in history, can also at times be a mechanism to exclude minorities from the German/European moral makeup and the fold of national belonging. Expanding from Edmund Husserl's embodied approach to empathy to a socially situated approach, via the process of *paarung*, allows us to reinterpret expressions of fear and envy, currently seen as failed empathy, as instances of intersubjective connections at work. In my reinterpretation of Husserl's ideas, the process of *paarung* that enables empathy to happen is not abstract, but pairs particular experiences happening at particular times and places under particular circumstances to individuals of certain social standing and cultural influences. An analogy can be made to shoes. Anyone has the capacity to imagine themselves in someone else's shoes. Nevertheless, the emotional reactions the experience triggers in each person will be shaped by individual past experiences and social positioning. Hence grandchildren of workers who arrived Germany after the World War II to rebuild the country resist an ethnicized Holocaust memory and engage with it keenly through their own subject positions.

## Keywords:

Keyword; keyword; keyword; keyword

## Introduction:

For many years, Juliana worked as a guide at a number of former concentration camps in Germany. I asked about her impressions of Muslim minority Germans visiting the camps. "Lots of immigrants [meaning Turkish and Arab-Germans] visited," she told [me](#). "And I

had a feeling that they were different from other visitors.” After stopping briefly, she added, “Now I do not know if they really were different, but I could tell that I and other guides were irritated by them. There was a feeling that they did not belong there and that they should not be engaging with the German past. Somehow their presence at the camp did not fit.” When I pushed her further to explain what she meant, Juliana said, “For example, when they go to the camps, immigrants start to feel like they will be sent there next. They come out of the camp anxious and afraid. I do not like it at all when they do that, and I do not even want to take them there.”

Mehmet, a German history teacher of Turkish background, worked in a Holocaust education program for immigrants. He told me that some students did not want to talk about the Jews’ suffering, “because according to them it is always about the Jews and no one cares about them.” Arab students in particular, he said, “raise the topic of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict when we bring up the Holocaust. They compare Israelis to Nazis and say that Palestinians are the victims of the new Holocaust carried out by the Israelis.”<sup>i</sup> How Muslim minority Germans, specifically Turkish- and Arab-Germans, do not engage with the Holocaust in the right way became a concern for Holocaust educators in the 1990s (Fava, 2015) and recently became a matter of public political discussion. In June 2015, Kurt Steiner, an MP from the Christian Social Union in Bavaria, declared that students who come from Muslim, refugee, and asylum-seeking families do not need to visit concentration camps as part of their education. Mr. Steiner explained, “Muslims and refugees do not have any connection to the history of German National Socialism. And this should remain so.” He further explained, “One should be careful with such students because they face cognitive and emotional challenges” (Smale, 2015). Left-wing politicians responded swiftly to his statement. Georg Rosenthal of the Social Democrat Party responded that visiting the scenes of Nazi crimes is “especially important for young immigrants so that they can understand why they need to assume responsibility for German history” (Smale, 2015).

Although there is no consensus about what exactly is “wrong” about the way Muslim minority Germans and Europeans engage with the Holocaust, recently there has been widely shared public discomfort with it (Allouche-Benayoun and Jikeli, 2013). Newspapers run stories about how Muslim students refuse to attend concentration camp tours and do not engage with the material on National Socialism in history classes (Kouparanis, 2008; Schmidl, 2003). Mr. Rosenthal’s statement reveals that the core of the perceived problem is an emotional (as well as cognitive) challenge seen as specific to the Muslim minority, which prevents them from having empathy towards Jewish victims of the Holocaust. Educators often complain to me and to others about the unfitting emotions Muslim minority members express in relation to the Holocaust. Most common complaints include fear that something like the Holocaust may happen to them as well, jealousy of the status of Jewish victims; and pride in their national background. Some German experts utilize outmoded national character analysis to explain the root of the problem with an essentialized approach towards Turkish and Arab cultures (Author 2016). They suggest that Arabs have a tendency towards self-victimization and Turks feel inherently proud, characteristics leading each group to an inability to empathize with Jewish victims (Jikeli, 2007; Mueller 2007). Others think that, because the German

education system does not recognize their identities, Turkish and Arab background immigrants focus on themselves instead of on the victims of the Holocaust (Gryglewsky, 2010). While experts try to explain what is wrong with how Muslims relate to the Holocaust and why this is the case, governmental and non-governmental organizations in Germany, France, the Netherlands, Austria, and Switzerland fund dozens of extra-curricular programs designed specifically to teach the Muslim minority about National Socialism and encourage them to empathize with Jewish victims.<sup>ii</sup> In such programs, Muslim minorities are taught that “help, survival, civil courage, and resistance to authoritarian structures” as part of their integration into German society as democratic citizens (Daughan, 2014). In orientation programs organized for (Muslim as well as non-Muslim) migrants, participants are schooled “to remember, mourn, and even feel shame for, events that predated their arrival in Germany by decades” (Autumn Brown, 2014: 439).

Despite the special programs devoted to non-German citizens and residents, especially to those of Turkish, Arab and other Muslim backgrounds, such people continue to be accused of relating to the Holocaust memory incorrectly, and of not shouldering responsibility for this massive crime. What triggers the strong need to develop Holocaust education programs specifically for the racialized minorities who are increasingly seen in opposition to European identity? What does the popular conviction that regular Holocaust education cannot generate proper empathy when translated across ethnic and religious boundaries reveal about the relation of Holocaust memory education to national identification in Germany? Focusing on instances where the reactions of Muslim minority Germans towards the Holocaust were judged unempathetic or morally wrong, this article explores how Holocaust education and contemporary understandings of empathy, in teaching about the worst manifestation of racism in history, can also at times exclude minorities from the German/European moral makeup and the fold of national belonging.

Returning to 20<sup>th</sup> century discussions of empathy in the German language, especially as developed by Edmund Husserl, reveals a much more complex and nuanced experience of intersubjective connection. On this basis I examine Holocaust education in Germany and the conceptualization of empathy that constitutes it. My critique turns the inquiry around so that, rather than placing the emotional reactions of Muslim minority Germans towards the Holocaust on trial for their inadequacies, I can query assumptions about German national belonging in specific, and more generally any national belonging that offers a single historical perspective as a moral standard. Building on Husserl’s concept of the intersubjective nature of empathy, we see that the previous experiences and positionality of the empathizer, not their moral qualities, shape the nature of the empathetic process.

## From *einuehlung* to empathy and back

Arguably, empathy has become the most celebrated political emotion of the twenty-first century. Contemporary public figures from Barack Obama (2006) to Marc Zuckerberg<sup>iii</sup>

talk about empathy as the root of responsible citizenship. Dozens of best-selling books promise to improve the capacity for empathy so that we can have a more civil and equal society, develop better relationships, and succeed in business. Primatologist Frans DeWaal was hailed for his discovery of mirror neurons in apes that allow the “recognition, attention, and imitation” of another’s mental states (Preston and DeWaal. 2002: 14) and lead to “evolution of emotional processes like empathy and overt behaviors like helping” (ibid, 20). Later he claimed this as proof that “empathy comes to our species naturally” (DeWaal. 2006: 4).

Introduced and developed in the German language, empathy has not always been seen as a desirable quality necessary for the development of moral, social or political life. The first German philosopher who engaged with the concept *Einfluehlung* was the 18<sup>th</sup> century Romantic Johann Gottfried Herder, who talked about the connection between feeling and knowing (Edwards, 2013). Robert Visser popularized the term in 1873 in his dissertation in the field of aesthetics and advanced the notion that the term literally means “feeling into” an art object (Visser, 1993: 89-123). Theodor Lipps (1903) introduced the concept to the field of psychology as the basic capacity to understand others as minded creatures. The word ‘empathy’ appeared in the English language for the first time in 1909, when Cornell University psychologist Edward Titchner translated the German word into English, defining it as Lipps had used it. In the United States, Franz Boas relied on the concept *Einfluehlung* as developed by Herder to describe the basis of the anthropological method of ethnography (Edwards, 2013; Bunzl, 2004). Only after the second World War did empathy come to be understood as a measurable attribute in an individual or group (Dymond, 1949; Norman and Leidling 1956) — one that came to be seen as lacking among many non-Jewish Germans during and shortly after the Third Reich (Parkinson 2015).

Before the arrival of the word empathy in the English language, ‘sympathy’ was used to describe more or less the same phenomenon of understanding how others feel. But ‘sympathy’ has a different genealogy in the English intellectual scene, starting in mid-19<sup>th</sup> century with the earliest discussions by the philosophers and good friends, David Hume and Adam Smith. Hume used the word as the capacity to read into the mind of others and promoted the idea that sentiment formed the basis of moral action (Kelly, 2012). Smith shared the idea that sympathy is the basis of a moral community and of judgement in that society (Sayre-McCord, 2013). But in politics, psychology, and neuroscience over the last couple of decades, scholars and lay intellectuals seem to deliberately employ the word ‘empathy’ and avoid the use of ‘sympathy.’ Despite change in nomenclature, empathy seems to be synonymous with what Hume and Smith meant by sympathy: an emotion akin to compassion, it is the ethical basis for individual action, the moral virtue necessary for proper political action, and the glue that binds communities together.<sup>iv</sup>

In the last decade, anthropologists have critically explored the role of positive emotions such as sympathy and compassion in humanitarian politics (Fassin, 2005). Politics based on triggering good emotions often end disregarding universal rights.<sup>v</sup> Strong evidence shows how this process works in terms of political asylum (Kelly, 2012;

Tiktin, 2011), charity (Elisha. 2008; Mettermaier 2012), foreign aid (Paragi, 2017) and good governmentality (MacManus, 2017). Additionally, scholars have noted that compassion assumes a position of privilege (Berlant, 2004). A tool of neo-liberalism (Muehlbach, 2011), its roots lie in colonialism (Balkenhol, 2016). Echoing Hannah Arendt, Muehlback argues that managing politics with emotions such as sympathy and compassion “unites citizens through the particularities of cosuffering and dutiful response, rather than the universality of rights; through the passions ignited by inequality rather than presumptions of equality; and through emotions, rather than politics (2011: 62). A corresponding discussion of the political context of empathy has been lacking.<sup>vi</sup> To promote a more complex understanding of empathy in its social and political context, without entirely discarding its moral implications, I follow the lead of recent psychological anthropologists who have turned to earlier discussions of empathy in the German language, especially those of Edmund Husserl (Holland and Throop, 2011; Throop, 2012; Duranti, 2010). According to Husserl empathy is the basis of intersubjective experience. It happens when we attribute intentionality to another by putting ourselves in their shoes. According to Alessandro Duranti, Husserl’s concept of intersubjectivity has been misunderstood and mistranslated as “mutual understanding” starting from the earliest English translations in the 1930s (2010: 21). Noting that Husserl often used words such as “Wechselseverstandigung” and “Platzwechsel” Duranti points out that Husserl’s locus of intersubjective experience was “the possibility of changing places [...] or trading places” (2010: 21), not necessarily of mutual understanding. Accordingly, empathy does not mean that “we simultaneously come to the same understanding of any given situation (although this can happen), but that we have, to start, the possibility of exchanging places, of seeing the world from the point of view of the Other” (Duranti, 2010: 21).

The complexity of empathy lies exactly in the fact that, even though humans can imagine the possibility of exchanging places and can infer what others might be experiencing from their different standpoints, full access to their experiences is never possible.<sup>vii</sup> In Husserl’s words: “Each person has, from the same place in space and with the same lighting, the same view of, for example, a landscape. But never can the other, at exactly the same time as me have the exact same appearance as I have. My appearances belong to me, his to him” (in Duranti; 2010: 21). We can always misread someone’s emotions just as we can misinterpret someone’s words (Leavitt, 1996). How individuals fill in the gap between the experiences of others and their understanding of these experiences is as complex as the original intersubjective connection. Husserl’s concept of *paarung*, translated as coupling and pairing, gives insights in how this process of filling the gaps works (Throop, 2008: 403-4).

For Husserl, empathizers’ previous experiences shape their experiences of empathy through pairing, the process in which we pair our bodies with that of another: “Pairing first comes about when the Other enters my field of perception. [...] a body “similar” to mine. [...] with the transfer of sense, this body must forthwith appropriate from mine the sense: animate organism” (Husserl, 1988: 113). He describes this process through the experience of his own two hands touching each other: “When my left hand touches my right, I am experiencing myself in a manner that anticipates both the way in

which an Other would experience me and the way in which I would experience another” (Zahavi, 2003:104). We can anticipate how it would feel for someone else to touch our hands based on our own touch, but we can never really know how it feels for them. Clearly, embodied intersubjectivity is the most crucial aspect of Husserl’s understanding of pairing and the resulting empathy. However, I suggest that Husserl’s concept of *paarung* can extend the basis of intersubjectivity from the body to social positioning. Husserlian or not, phenomenology in general has been commonly criticised for its focus on the immediate and subjective experience that does not take objective political, social, or economical structural conditions into account (Throop and Murphy, 2002). In the last decade scholars have come to recognize that Husserl’s understanding of empathy must incorporate history, politics, and society to understand how intersubjective experience is shaped (Desjarlais and Throop, 2010). Here, I point out that Husserl already acknowledges “what I have learnt in the past does not leave me untouched. It shapes my understanding and interpretation of new objects by reminding me of what I have experienced before” (Zahavi, 2014: 132). It is exactly past experiences, either accidental or structural, that influence how two different individuals have diverse experiences even when they swap places, or how they can momentarily imagine themselves in yet a third place, as is the case for minority and majority Muslims who empathize with the Jewish victims of the Holocaust. Thus, empathic experiences are not only bodily but also socially and historically situated.

The situated nature of intersubjective experience is easier to understand if we explain Husserl’s understanding of empathy in a simple analogy of swapping shoes. The empathizer does not take off just any pair of shoes to put herself in another pair but takes off one specific pair. They may be her favourite, or they may be too tight. Thus, the process of pairing that enables empathy to happen is not abstract, but pairs particular shoes worn at a particular time and place under particular circumstances by individuals of certain social standing and cultural influences. Anyone has the capacity to imagine themselves in someone else’s shoes. Nevertheless, the emotional reactions shoe swapping triggers in each person will be shaped by individual past experiences and social positioning. This approach to intersubjectivity allows us to understand how history, society, and politics are always already part of the immediate experience and hence how there can never be one empathetic prescription for any given situation, as I demonstrate in the following example of minority Germans relating to Jewish victims of the Holocaust.

## History of empathy after Auschwitz

Following their victory in 1945, the Allied Forces occupied Germany, with the stated purpose of transforming the physically, politically, and morally ruined country into a peaceful and prosperous democracy. In this process they approached National Socialism as a kind of German exceptionalism and found the sources of fascism in German culture and psychology. For Americans, the strongest Allied power, democracy was not only a matter of elections, jurisdiction, and parliament, but “also a type of behaviour, a public attitude, and an affective relationship to the state, independent of those other political institutions” (Fay, 2008: xiv). Americans vigorously promoted the idea that inculcating

certain emotions towards the victims of National Socialism was crucial for Germany's re-education and normalization (Parkinson, 2015). Western Allies tried to make Germans face what they had done by making them walk through death camps, watch films, and look at pictures of suffering victims (Jarausch, 2006). During these activities, they closely scrutinized the Germans' emotional expressions. In her study of post-War Germany, Anne Parkinson discusses how lack of emotion, and especially lack of melancholia and sadness, was often seen as the root of the German problem and the element that made them seem unfit for democracy. According to her, both Americans and Germans characterized post-war Germany as "suffering from coldness or *Gefuehlskaelte* and emotional rigidity or *Gefuehlsstarke* frozen affect and emotional inability" (Parkinson, 2015: 5). Sociologists, psychologists, and anthropologists came together in the US under new funding schemes to figure out what was wrong with the emotional make-up of German culture and how it could be rehabilitated (Fay, 2008).

German philosopher Theodor Adorno played a key role in formulating an approach to coming terms with the Holocaust as we know it today. One of the founders of critical theory in the Frankfurt School, Adorno spent World War II in exile in the United States. During that time, he wrote about the German authoritarian personality, antisemitism, propaganda and how to develop German democracy (Mariotti, 2016). Upon his return to Germany, he was influential in shaping post-War German political culture. He urged that, "The premier demand upon all education is that Auschwitz not happen again" (Adorno, 2005: 191). Adorno believed that proper education would foster mature self-critical, self-aware citizens who are resistant to authoritarian tendencies (French and Thomas, 1999). He advocated a confrontational social-psychological approach towards the Nazi past (Messeth, 2012) and critical self-reflection (Cho, 2009).

German memory culture and Holocaust education have undergone multiple transformations since the end of World War II. At every turn, tendencies for "institutionalization of a ritual shame" (Fulbrook, 1999) or "ritualized regret" (Olick, 2007) competed with a desire to recognize all Germans as victims of the war and to relativize the crimes of National Socialists (Niven, 2006). In the 1980s, conservative German historians stated that it was time to embrace a positive nationalism and accept that Nazi crimes were cruel, but comparable to other totalitarian violations, especially those conducted by the USSR (Kampe, 1987). After German unification philosopher Jurgen Habermas relied on Adorno's legacy in his strong opposition to those who wanted to relativize and trivialize the Holocaust. By doing so, he "translated Adorno's standpoint on the pedagogical aims of working through history as a model of critical remembrance into a protocol of ideal citizenship" (Ball, 2009: 47) in Germany and also in Europe. Major post-unification projects such as the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe, which opened in Berlin in 2005, and the establishment of the foundation Remembrance, Responsibility, and the Future (EWZ) in 2000 to compensate Nazi slave workers are manifestations of Habermas' influence as they single out Jews as victims and Germans with roots in the Third Reich as perpetrators in the crimes of National Socialism (Wolfgram, 2010). In contemporary Germany, a self-aware, self-critical, and victim centered approach towards the Holocaust is considered "a core guarantor for the stability of Germany's liberal-democratic order" (von Bieberstein, 2016: 909).



Ironically, the approach that resists relativizing the Holocaust limits the responsibility and benefits of lessons learned from the Holocaust to an ethnicized German nation and its European collaborators. As Michael Rothberg and Yasemin Yildiz put it, the paradox of German memory culture is that: “in the aftermath of the Nazi genocide, it has seemed necessary to preserve an ethnically homogeneous notion of German identity in order to ensure Germans’ responsibility for the crimes of the recent past, even though that very notion of ethnicity was one of the sources of those crimes” (2011: 35). In 1998 German Jewish historian Dan Diner, for example, argued against changing citizenship laws to allow immigrant naturalization on the basis that belonging to the German nation followed having memories of and rejecting the Holocaust. “Those whose memory reaches back to the Nazi past, and this first and foremost, by its rejection, do belong dialectically to an ethnified German collective. Germans are those [who] define themselves in terms of belonging by rejection of the Nazi past. A German citizen of Turkish background can hardly fully belong to such a collective. He cannot use the common ‘we’ concerning the contaminated past of Germany” (Diner in Rothberg and Yildiz 2011: 35). Jürgen Habermas himself stated that coming to terms with the Nazi past was necessary and beneficial for ethnic Germans who committed the genocide: “a coherent and truthful self-interpretation is supposed to make it possible for *us* to critically appropriate and take responsibility for *our own life-history*” (Habermas, 1997: 18, italics mine). In that sense, as the Holocaust became “a primal phantasmatic scene of guilt and shame around which German national identifications are organized” (Lewis, 2013: 105) both the responsibility for and the opportunity of learning lessons from the Holocaust was seen to be mainly for ethnic German nationals. Within this context late-comers who were not directly involved with the Holocaust have been left outside Germany’s national memory culture (Konuk, 2007; Rothberg and Yıldız, 2011; Chin and Fehrenbach, 2009; Partridge, 2010; Baer, 2013).

Since 2000, Turkish- and Arab-Germans have often been accused of not engaging with the Holocaust, not learning the right lessons from it, not empathizing with its victims and of re-importing anti-Semitism to a country that had otherwise dealt with it (Özyürek, 2016). Yet, despite public unease around their engagement with the Holocaust, research documents a keen engagement of Turkish background Germans with the topic, but one that deviates from national expectations. Instead of performances that symbolically transform German guilt and shame to responsibility and engagement (Dekel, 2013), Turkish-Germans often identify with the victims. Turkish-German authors such as Sevgi Özdamar (Konuk, 2007) and Feridun Zaimoğlu (Margalit, 2009), immigrant association leaders (Bodeman and Yurdakul, 2006), and ordinary Turkish background Germans (Giorgi, 2003; Mandel, 2008) associate themselves with the Jews under National Socialism. Leslie Adelson (2000) suggests that this process of building connections involves not a simple equation, but a complex “touching tales” among Turks, Germans, and Jews. The ethnographic instances I discuss below illustrate how such unexpected connections are established and how they challenge and expand national memory culture in Germany.

## Wrong emotions for the Holocaust

This section focuses on first, second, and third generation working class Turkish- and Arab-background Germans taking part in curricular and extra-curricular Holocaust education, who were judged harshly for not engaging with the Holocaust in the correct manner and for not empathizing sufficiently with the Jewish victims. I observed these instances during my ethnographic research on Muslim minorities and Holocaust education in Germany conducted over five years during 2006-2008, 2009-2011, and 2013-2014 and on multiple short-term visits since 2016. Most of this research was conducted in Berlin, home to 220,000 Muslims mostly Turkish and Arab background (Muehe, 2010).<sup>viii</sup> I also conducted extensive research in post-industrial Duisburg, which has a high percentage of immigrants,<sup>ix</sup> and travelled to other West German towns to observe Holocaust education programs devoted to Muslim and immigrant communities. These education programs can be located via organizations such as Wannsee House of Conference, Anna Frank House, Action Reconciliation Service for Peace, and Kruezberg Initiative against Anti-Semitism. They regularly work with Muslim minorities for Holocaust education and anti-Semitism prevention. I also found individual programs and projects organized by groups such as Muslim Youth, Neukoelln Mothers in Berlin, Workers Union in Berlin, Karame youth club in Berlin, and Zitrone youth club in Duisburg through personal contacts and internet research.

Over the years I observed dozens of short- and long-term Holocaust education programs catered towards and/or organized by Muslim minorities. I conducted over fifty individual interviews with Turkish- and Arab-background Germans living in Berlin, Duisburg, and Aachen about their encounters with the Holocaust memory in Germany, as well as over a dozen interviews with teachers and educators who regularly deliver Holocaust education to Muslim-minority Germans, among others. These interviews were conducted in German, English, and Turkish, depending on the interviewees' wishes. I also observed ninth grade history classes at a mixed-track school that caters mostly to non-German background students in Berlin. In comments repeatedly heard from educators, and in personal observations made during this research, Turkish- and Arab-background Germans were often judged as reacting wrongly to the Holocaust, especially with fear and envy. Below I explore such instances ethnographically.

### Fear

Nazmiye is a petite and well-spoken woman in her forties who was born in Turkey but has lived in Germany since she was seven years old. I met her because I heard that she organized Holocaust education for immigrant women.<sup>x</sup> She has been the coordinator of Neighbourhood Mothers (*die Stadteilmuttern*) in Neukölln, where immigrant women teach effective parenting methods to other immigrant women. When she started working as a trainer in 2006, there was considerable discussion about pogroms against Jews: "Because I grew up in Germany since I was seven, I knew about the pogroms, but the women who had grown up in Turkey did not know anything about them. Around that same time my friend's nephew visited Austria. There he bought a copy of Hitler's *Mein Kampf* and was talking about it. At the time, there were a lot of attacks against foreigners

in East Germany. We wanted to learn why there was such an explosion of hatred.” One partner of the Neighbourhood Mothers is Action Reconciliation Service for Peace, the main Christian organization in Germany dedicated to atonement for the Holocaust. They quickly organized a program for the Neukölln mothers about the Nazi period. Nazmiye told me that even though they learned a lot, the training was a very disturbing experience for all of them: “We were all shocked. How could a society turn so fanatical? We started to ask if they could do such a thing to us as well. We spent a lot of time wondering whether we would find ourselves in the same position as the Jews.” This is exactly the position Juliana told me that German educators find so disturbing when they teach minorities about the Holocaust. Other Germans apparently found it even less tolerable and reacted harshly when Nazmiye and her friends voiced their fear:

“A month later we were at a church in Nikolassee as part of our training program. We told them about our project and then told them that we are afraid of being victims. The people at the church became really angry at us. They told us to go back to our countries if this is how we think. I was really surprised at their reaction. I could not understand why this is not a legitimate question. Germans can ask this question, too. In Neukölln’s local parliament the NPD (National Democratic Party, a Neo-Nazi front) is represented. They are very strong in East Germany. Why should I not be concerned about the Nazis?” During the heated conversation, Nazmiye repeated Holocaust Survivor Primo Levi’s statement: it happened once, so it can happen again. But this made the ladies in the church even more furious. Nazmiye and her friends were asked to leave the church. Nazmiye’s face turned red when she told me this story. She was reliving the shock she experienced when she was confronted with extreme anger while expecting to be admired for her interest in the history of the country of her new citizenship.

Since I finished my research, Islamophobic attacks have increased dramatically in Germany. In the first official report of anti-Muslim hate crimes in Germany, the German Ministry of Internal Affairs reported that close to 1,000 hate crimes committed against Muslims and mosques were reported in 2017, which left 33 people injured (Deutsche Welle, 2018). These attacks intensify feelings of fear among the Muslim minority. At the time of my interviews, I found out that intense fear was more common among first generation immigrants than members of the second and third generations. When I asked whether they think something like the Holocaust could ever happen again in Germany, almost all second and third generation Turkish- and Arab-Germans who grew up in Germany confidently told me that this would be impossible even though racism is still alive in parts of Germans society. A more common reaction I observed in relation to the Holocaust memory among second and third generation Muslim-Germans was a sense of unfairness because discrimination towards Muslims in Germany and around the world goes unrecognized. This emotional reaction is reminiscent of sibling rivalry or envy and is one that Holocaust educators commonly dismiss as “victim competition.”

## Envy

In 2013, I joined an interfaith youth group tour to Auschwitz called “Where was

G-d at Auschwitz?” initiated by the Dortmund chapter of Muslim Youth (*Muslimische Jugend*).<sup>xi</sup> Muslim Youth members explained to me that this was the second tour they had initiated. As a group striving to develop a German-Muslim identity, I was told, it was essential to learn more about this part of history and come to terms with it. Eight 16-20 year-old youth members of Catholic, Protestant, and Muslim communities in Dortmund as well as two from the Jewish community were present along with two adult representatives from each group.

The first stop on the trip was the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe in Berlin. The tour guide assigned to us was half Latin American, half Israeli and a recent immigrant to Berlin. Our group started with a discussion of how one should feel in relation to the monument and what it stands for. The guide asked students how they were feeling. A member of the Protestant group who had a troubled look on his face answered with one word: “Guilty.” The guide shrugged his shoulders and rhetorically asked what feeling guilty is good for. The first young man tried to defend his feelings: “My grandfather was an SS soldier. I cannot help feeling guilty here. The feeling just comes to me.” A member of the Muslim group, a fifteen-year old young man with Moroccan background, joined the conversation: “To me guilt is a very negative feeling. I do not feel guilty.” The guide ended the discussion by directing them to how he thinks they should be feeling: “It is true that guilt is a negative and pessimistic feeling. It does not help anything. We do not want this. Empathy is the right feeling. We need to think about how this history is part of today.”

The fact that the guide wanted the group to make what is learned from history part of today made the Muslim members of the group visibly excited. A few of them

surrounded the tour guide when he gave the group some free time. Alaa, a young woman of Turkish descent, approached the guide and said, “Look, I also feel like a victim in society. I am marginalized everywhere in German society. I want to show that I am also here but I cannot get any support. The government didn’t give us any support for this trip because we are a Muslim organization. And now that I am here I feel more frightened. What do you recommend that I do?” The guide looked at the young woman sympathetically and recommended that she move to Berlin when she is old enough, reassuring her that she will not feel like she is judged all the time in Berlin.

Not exactly impressed by the guide’s dismissive response, Alaa and other Muslim participants kept trying to explain to anyone with a sympathetic ear that coming to memorial sites makes them feel fearful of being discriminated against, and they are frustrated that their fear is not taken seriously. At a public event I had heard one member of the group, Esma, give a presentation on the similarities between anti-Semitism and Islamophobia, with images of Muslims taken all over the world from the covers of respectable German weekly magazines. She mentioned how in 2012 a German politician argued that employers should inform the state about their Muslim employees, especially whether or not they prayed. This time our conversation took place in Oswiecim, Poland, the site of Auschwitz, and Esma brought religion up again. She said, “Do you realise how scary such things are once you are here? When you see the yellow stars, Jews were wearing... Or when you stand in front of the Muselmann sculpture at the camp.... Non-Muslims in this society do not understand why we feel afraid when we come here. They get angry at us and say mean things, like we try to belittle the Holocaust and we are anti-Semitic. Or they roll their eyes and say we try to play the victim role to attract attention.”

Esma was referring to a representative statue in the Auschwitz exhibit. The name of the statue—Muselmann—was a slang word used in the extermination camps to refer to inmates who became resigned and apathetic to their environment and fate as a result of starvation, exhaustion, and hopelessness.<sup>xii</sup> There is no consensus as to why the word Muselmann became the term for people in this desperate condition. Georgia Agamben argues, “The most likely explanation of the term can be found in the literal meaning of the Arabic word Muslim: the one who submits unconditionally to the will of God” (Agamben, 2002; 45).<sup>xiii</sup> According to Yad Vashem Shoa Research Center, inmates likened the weak state of these individuals to images of Muslims prostrating in prayer.<sup>xiv</sup> In reality no Muslim captives were brought to the camp because they were Muslims; however the idea that inmates in the worst condition were likened to Muslims or that “they became Muslims” (Koning, 2015) visibly unsettled Muslim members of the group and intensified their feelings of fear.

Later that day Esma shared her impression that the whole emphasis on guilt was an excuse for not doing anything about discrimination and racism today. “All these Protestant and Catholic people in our group who say they feel guilty and cry their eyes out are just swimming in history and in their own emotions. Most of their emotions have nothing to do with the Holocaust!” Esma was referring to the group discussion after our tour of the first camp in Auschwitz, which was very emotional for all of us. After a while I noticed that a good number of the Christian Germans started talking about their personal dramas. One girl talked about a friend who had committed suicide; another could not stop crying about her parent’s divorce. Group discussion quickly moved from the Holocaust to the central question of “Where was G-d in Auschwitz?” or, why God does not interfere in

horrible situations? Protestant youth in the group expressed particular anger at God for not being there for their friends, or for them, just like God had not prevented the Holocaust.

As the group discussion became increasingly emotional and personal, Muslim members repeatedly tried to bring the topic to current affairs. As a few participants sobbed, Alaa picked up the teddy bear that participants took turns holding, to show that it was her turn to talk: “Today we experienced intense emotions. We all cried. But let’s now think about what we bring to today. Let us talk about what is happening in Germany and in the world. Let us make sure that our tears are not in vain.” Later Alaa told me that she wanted to bring up the topic of the suffering of Palestinians. Instead, because a few members of the group looked overwhelmed by emotion, the social workers decided to end the group discussion. The next day Protestant social workers told me that they were extremely happy that the Muslims were there. They thought making links between the Holocaust and today’s events are good that care was needed to make sure that no tragedy or case of discrimination was compared to the Holocaust.

The above case illustrates what Holocaust education experts and social workers in Germany commonly call “victim competition.” One important aspect of these feelings is that the emphasis on Jewish victimhood makes it difficult to talk about Palestinian victimhood in relation to the Israeli state. Banu, a nineteen-year-old Moroccan law student at the University of Maastricht in the Netherlands—the daughter of a nanny and an engineer—profoundly believed that the Holocaust and Jewish suffering are taught in schools at the expense of other forms of agony. During our conversation about her Holocaust education experiences, she told me about how she got in to trouble once in

school for comparing French colonialism in Algeria to the Holocaust. On another occasion, she was scolded for trying to give a presentation on the wall erected between Israel and the Palestinian territories. In both instances, she was reprimanded by her teachers and told that she was spreading propaganda. Reminding me of many other statements from Turkish- and Arab-Germans, Banu said:

“I know a lot of Muslims who intensely studied and learned about what happened to the Jews. I think the Holocaust is very important. But I also think we should pay attention to what is happening now. There is too much focus on the Holocaust and the 9/11 attacks. It is prejudicial to say that Muslims do not condemn the Holocaust or do not sympathize with the Jews. I know a lot of people who do. But Muslims feel resentful (*verbittered*) about this [Israeli-Palestinian] conflict because it is not acknowledged. You know, Jews are not the only victims in the world!”

Unlike in most Western liberal democracies, claiming victim status (Fassin and Rechtman, 2009) is not politically favorable for legitimacy in Germany. The memory culture embraced after German unification is specifically positioned against continuous attempts to bring up German victimhood during National Socialism (Niven, 2006). Hence, it is sensitive about victimhood claims by any group other than Holocaust victims (von Bieberstein, 2016). Simultaneously, since unification the Holocaust is shifting from a burden of debilitating shame to proof of German responsibility (Markovits, 2006; Welch and Wittlinger, 2011). Germany’s ability to confront its dark past is increasingly seen as a sign of special moral qualifications that legitimize its appearance on the world stage again (Frochtner, 2014). When Muslim minority youth appear to compete with Jews for victim status or express fear that something like the Holocaust might happen to



them, they lose their chance to be heard legitimately in the discussion circle in Auschwitz and outside of it. Such expressions underscore accusations that the Muslim minority is emotionally and cognitively deficient and morally unfit to be legitimate members of German society. When Muslim-Germans express fear, they are judged to lack the cognitive skills required to understand how different today's Germany is from that of the 1930s. When they express envy, they do not seem to have the level of maturity necessary for full participation in German democracy. On the other hand, another perspective on empathy—a situated one—gives us clues on how to understand such unprescribed emotions as a deep connection with the Jewish victims of the Holocaust and new, non-nationalist contributions to the tradition of coming to terms with the past in Germany.

## Conclusion

During the past decade, researchers have explored how genuine relations are established between individuals portrayed by scholars and politicians as divided by bounded identities. Critiquing earlier models of co-existence that focused on tolerance of difference (Glick-Schiller, 2012), social and cultural integration (Anthias, 2013), and multiculturalism (Rattansi, 2011), they argued for new frames of interconnection such as “intersectional framing of connections” (Anthias, 2013), “domains of commonality” (Glick Schiller and Çağlar, 2015), “ordinary cosmopolitanism” (Lamont and Aksartova 2002), “interculturalism” (Rattansi, 2011), “asymmetrical interdependence” (Eckert 2016) or “solidarity without borders” (Agustin and Jorgensen, 2016). In this article I have attempted to show that novel and diverse empathic connectivities are established at cognitive and emotional levels, despite all odds and outside expected conventions.

Edmund Husserl tells us that establishing an intersubjective connection based on our own bodily experience is the starting point of gaining a perspective about what other persons might be experiencing in their own bodies. According to him, we grasp the other's body as something similar to our own (Luo, 2017: 45). Unanticipated and unprescribed emotional connections that some minority Germans who have experienced discrimination established with the Jewish Holocaust victims demonstrate that our socially situated experience is central to our window on understanding others' experiences. When we see a racialized, classed, or gendered individual, especially one who experiences discrimination, we have insight into how they might feel because we each have standing in a society that ranks people in terms of such categories. This empathy is why, when confronted with reminders of the Holocaust, some Turkish and

Arab background Germans fear that they might be victims if something like this were to happen again. Others establish a likeness between their own racialization and that of the Jews express, and feel envy that anti-Semitism is acknowledged, whereas Islamophobia is disregarded. The unexpected feelings Muslim-background Germans expressed during my fieldwork run counter to the expectations of Holocaust education programs aimed at triggering feelings of remorse and responsibility. Muslims expressing feelings outside this framework were judged to be lacking in moral qualities and the capacity to be good citizens. Yet, a Husserlian understanding of empathy shows us that feelings triggered by putting on someone else's shoes starts from and ends in the shoes one already owns. Hence an ethnic German and a racialized minority German wearing differently positioned shoes will not feel the same way when they put themselves in the shoes of Jewish Holocaust victims before eventually returning to their own shoes. However, as long as they swap shoes, they experience strong empathic connection with the victims of the Holocaust.

Even though Holocaust education programs in Germany now recognize that not everyone in Germany is an ethnic German with roots in the Third Reich, many do not acknowledge that a diverse society will generate different legitimate reactions to even the biggest tragedy, the gravest wrong doing. Ironically, otherwise admirable efforts of coming to terms with Germany's racist past have also become a mechanism for excluding racialized minorities from the moral fold of the German nation. At a time when Holocaust perpetrators and survivors are dying and the German society is becoming increasingly more diverse, German national self-definition continues to be based on a single model of empathic connection towards the victims of the Holocaust. Those who arrived Germany after the World War II challenge this approach and show there are many ways to connect with the Holocaust, many ways to infer what its victims might have experienced, and many ways to draw lessons that relate to today.

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## Notes

1. See also Can (2013), who writes about these education programs.
2. Yahuda Goodman and Nissim Mizrahi (2008) discuss how Israeli schoolteachers use different memory methods to teach Jews from Europe and North America compared to Middle Eastern and North African Jews, who also have different class standing.
3. [https://www.facebook.com/zuck/videos/10103671105741461/?autoplay\\_reason=gatekeeper&video\\_container\\_type=1&video\\_creator\\_product\\_type=7&app\\_id=2392950137&live\\_video\\_guests=0](https://www.facebook.com/zuck/videos/10103671105741461/?autoplay_reason=gatekeeper&video_container_type=1&video_creator_product_type=7&app_id=2392950137&live_video_guests=0)
4. Douglas Hollan and Jason Throop also note that there is confusion about the moral and social significance of the terms sympathy and empathy (2008, 386).
5. Others have also explored how hope has been seen as necessary for the reproduction of capitalism (Narotzky and Besnier 2014), political reform (Sukarieh 2012), the development of management (Irina 2016), and value production (Sliwiniski 2016), and how it has been unevenly distributed in society (Hage 2003).
6. For a thorough review of phenomenological approaches in anthropology see (Desjarlais and Throop 2012).
7. Different societies act on different assumptions about how accessible other minds are. Joel Robbins and Alan Rumsey (2008) co-edited a special journal issue of *Anthropological Quarterly* on a widespread belief in the Pacific that it is extremely difficult to know other people's minds, which they call "the doctrine of the opacity of other minds."
8. Since then around 55,000 refugees have arrived in Berlin, of whom a significant percent are Muslims.

9. Duisburg is notorious for its neighbourhoods such as Marxloh, with 64% of its population consisting of immigrant background residents. Most are from Turkey and some are Roma from Southeastern Europe.

10. This project is also discussed in detail by Michael Rothberg and Yasemin Yildiz (2011). They point out similar ways in which other immigrant background women engaged with the Holocaust memory. In that sense Nazmiye's perspective reflects that of dozens of other women who took part in the project.

<sup>11</sup>. Established in 1994 Muslimische Jugend promotes a Muslim youth culture based on a German identity and Islamic principles. For a long time, it was included on the watch list of the government agency responsible for protecting the constitution. It was recently taken off the list.

12. See Primo Levi's description of this figure (1959, 103).

13. [http://www.yadvashem.org/odot\\_pdf/Microsoft%20Word%20-%206474.pdf](http://www.yadvashem.org/odot_pdf/Microsoft%20Word%20-%206474.pdf)

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<sup>i</sup> See also Can (2013), who writes about these education programs.

<sup>ii</sup> Yahuda Goodman and Nissim Mizrahi (2008) discuss how Israeli schoolteachers use different memory methods to teach Jews from Europe and North America compared to Middle Eastern and North African Jews, who also have different class standing.

[https://www.facebook.com/zuck/videos/10103671105741461/?autoplay\\_reason=gatekeeper&video\\_container\\_type=1&video\\_creator\\_product\\_type=7&app\\_id=2392950137&live\\_video\\_guests=0](https://www.facebook.com/zuck/videos/10103671105741461/?autoplay_reason=gatekeeper&video_container_type=1&video_creator_product_type=7&app_id=2392950137&live_video_guests=0)

<sup>iv</sup> Douglas Hollan and Jason Throop also note that there is confusion about the moral and social significance of the terms sympathy and empathy (2008, 386).

<sup>v</sup> Others have also explored how hope has been seen as necessary for the reproduction of capitalism (Narotzky and Besnier 2014), political reform (Sukarieh 2012), the development of management (Irina 2016), and value production (Sliwiniski 2016), and how it has been unevenly distributed in society (Hage 2003).

<sup>vi</sup> For a through review of phenomenological approaches in anthropology see (Desjarlais and Throop 2012).

<sup>vii</sup> Different societies act on different assumptions about how accessible other minds are. Joel Robbins and Alan Rumsey (2008) co-edited a special journal issue of *Anthropological Quarterly* on a widespread belief in the Pacific that it is extremely difficult to know other people's minds, which they call "the doctrine of the opacity of other minds."

<sup>viii</sup> Since then around 55,000 refugees have arrived in Berlin, of whom a significant percent are Muslims.

<sup>ix</sup> Duisburg is notorious for its neighbourhoods such as Marxloh, with 64% of its population consisting of immigrant background residents. Most are from Turkey and some are Roma from Southeastern Europe.

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<sup>x</sup> This project is also discussed in detail by Michael Rothberg and Yasemin Yildiz (2011).

They point out similar ways in which other immigrant background women engaged with the Holocaust memory. In that sense Nazmiye's perspective reflects that of dozens of other women who took part in the project.

<sup>xi</sup> Established in 1994 Muslimische Jugend promotes a Muslim youth culture based on a German identity and Islamic principles. For a long time, it was included on the watch list of the government agency responsible for protecting the constitution. It was recently taken off the list.

<sup>xiii</sup> See Primo Levi's description of this figure (1959, 103).

<sup>xiv</sup> [http://www.yadvashem.org/odot\\_pdf/Microsoft%20Word%20-%206474.pdf](http://www.yadvashem.org/odot_pdf/Microsoft%20Word%20-%206474.pdf)