

Update from NLS: 15 December 2006

Shabbat Shalom from the New London Synagogue (VaYeshev)

1. From the Rabbi

Rahel and I have just returned from attending the annual meeting of the Rabbinical Assembly European Region that took place in Berlin. I must share with you the fact that this was the first time I have ever been in Berlin or, for that matter, in any place in Germany. Long ago I decided that I did not want to set foot in Germany. The place was too full of suffering, blood and death, too bound up with the greatest tragedy ever to befall our people. I did not want to be there. I did not want to be involved with people who had themselves either participated in the terrible events or passively acquiesced in them. However when this invitation came to participate in this conference and to teach at it, I decided to accept. Two things influenced me. First, that this was for the benefit of the Jewish community in Germany and second, that a new generation has now grown up in Germany of people who were not responsible for what happened but who have been educated to understand and acknowledge what happened and take responsibility for making certain that such a thing could never happen again.

For example, we met with the Minister of the Interior and I was very impressed by his openness and his concern for the relations with Israel and with the German Jewish community. It was his decision to permit Jews from the former Soviet Union to come to Germany, the result being that the Jewish community in Germany is therefore the fastest growing Jewish community in Europe. When this was mentioned to him, he responded emotionally that he did not take pride in that when he remembered what the numbers of Jews in Germany had been before the Nazi era. I was also impressed by the Jewish Museum with its candid presentation of the history of German Jewry from the beginning until today. It was heartening to see large numbers of German youth being guided through it, including a group of Muslim girls, complete with head coverings. Perhaps even more impressive was the way in which in many places throughout the city you suddenly come upon signs describing concentration camps or saying such things as "Jews were not permitted to sit on this bench" or "Jews were not allowed to enter this post office." Walking far into the Holocaust Memorial was a deeply moving experience. Not far from it one comes to an insignificant parking lot which covers the site of Hitler's bunker, the place where he killed himself – unfortunately too late in his cursed life. It was an almost surreal experience to be there, to feel the evil that emanated from that spot and to see the Holocaust Memorial at the very same moment.

As part of our meetings we visited Jewish organizations and synagogues. It was deeply moving to pray in the New Synagogue, the building that has become iconic in the picture showing it burning on Kristallnacht, the same synagogue where Lewandowski composed so much of the music we sing today, now served by a rabbi who is a member of our Rabbinical Assembly. Or to teach in a building that once housed the greatest school of the Jewish Enlightenment, where such giants as Geiger, Zunz and later Rosenzweig taught. It was heartening to see the new institutions that have grown up such as the Masorti kindergarten teaching children in Hebrew, German and English and now so large that it must move to a new building.

Since it is Chanukah time, one could not help but notice Hannukiot in front of

such places as the Jewish Museum and other public spots and remember that only 60 years ago or so such a thing would have been impossible. The rule is that the Chanukiah must be lit in a place where it can be seen in order to publicly proclaim the miracle, but that in times of danger, you do not do so. There is therefore a measure of pride and comfort in seeing the lights burning once again in Germany – and yet a stab of pain remembering the time when all the lights went out.

Reuven Hammer is the Rabbi of the New London Synagogue and taught at the meeting of the European Region of the Rabbinical Assembly in Berlin