



# The Compassionate Listening Project

(formerly Mid-East Citizen Diplomacy)

*A nonprofit organization dedicated to empowering individuals and communities to heal polarization and build bridges between people, communities and nations in conflict.*

Spring Newsletter, 2003

www.compassionatelistening.org

## Healing the Wounds of WWII: German-Jewish Reconciliation

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**Thirty-four courageous men and women** gathered in late September in Germany for our first Jewish-German Compassionate Listening project. For ten days, we listened to each other, and to Germans and Jews with widely varying experiences during WWII, including a former SS Soldier. The project touched us all at depths we could never have imagined. In these challenging times, we offer this *good news* newsletter to you, our circle of Compassionate Listeners around the world.

In a circuitous fashion, this project grew out of our Compassionate Listening work in Israel and Palestine. Almost two years ago, I brought a delegation of Compassionate Listeners to the home of my friend Ester, an inspiring Israeli woman in her 70's. A German holocaust survivor, Ester told our group that she had made peace with Germany over the years, and returns each year to tell her story in the schools. Looking at the beautiful photos of Ester's parents, murdered in Auschwitz, I simply could not imagine how she had come to find peace with Germany. In an emotional exchange at the end of our afternoon together, I confided to her that I did

not have the courage to visit Germany. Ester smiled...it was not hard to miss the irony of the situation. I had dedicated my whole adult life to Jewish-Palestinian reconciliation - encouraging people on each side to see the humanity of the "other," yet somehow I could not apply this to the German-Jewish wound. "Oh Leah" Ester said, her smile both kind and challenging, "It's time for you to go to Germany." I was horrified...and I knew she was right.

The opportunity presented itself almost immediately, and three months later I flew to Hamburg to speak at the annual gathering of the European *Earthstewards Network*. Overcoming my fear was no small endeavor. I had nightmares for weeks before my departure. But it wasn't until I stood waiting in the airport lobby for my friend to pick me up that the enormity of my challenge became clear. There I stood, leaning into a cold pillar, shaking. In the long minutes before she arrived, I calmed myself by looking at the faces of small children. How would I ever get through the coming days?

Nothing could have surprised me more than my experiences over the next two weeks. I felt as

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*Leah Green, Director, The Compassionate Listening Project*



*The project was hosted in Lebensgarten, an ecovillage in Germany. Each morning we joined the community for circle dancing.*

though the hardest stone had cracked open, and that I could now move on with my life with the strength to face anything. And something quite unexpected happened. Talking with dozens of new friends in Germany, I began to glimpse the depth of *their* unhealed pain. Most significant for me, I saw how deeply we needed one another to heal this still-gaping, Jewish-German wound. Just as I had experienced with Jews and Palestinians, the very people we hold as our greatest enemies are ones who can be, in equal measure, our greatest healers.

My new German colleague and friend, Beate Ronnefeldt and I were determined to create an opportunity for other Jews and Germans to come together to transform the wounds of war. Almost overnight, a Compassionate Listening project in Germany was born. (German sponsors of our project are the Earthstewards Network and the International Fellowship of Reconciliation.)

housed women prisoners of war from Eastern Europe. Today, with the beautifully renovated buildings and gardens, its very existence announces the possibility of transformation and healing.

The beauty of the people and the place created a sacred crucible for our work. From the moment that the facilitators arrived for our three days of preparations, we were surrounded by a force-field of love. The first night I sat in a chair in the hallway, my bare feet cold on the tile floor. Our hostess, who did not speak English, came to me, placed a pillow under my feet and kissed my head. There were hugs, kisses, and words of support and gratitude for our presence at every turn. How could we fail in such an environment?

And then the participants arrived, and our work began. Two of our Jewish participants were Berlin natives, now in

*Project  
Facilitators:  
(left to right)  
Christel Konemund,  
Leah Green,  
Rich Hoffman,  
Beate Ronnefeldt,  
Lynda Boozer,  
Brian Berman,  
Andrea Cohen,  
Martin Dronsfield*



*“We come up to the altar one at a time,  
light a candle, present our offerings.  
The ancestors’ pictures are all hanging  
together, touching each other...in ways they  
would never have done in life.”  
- Mina Cohen, USA*

Soon after I returned home, Beate and I set the project dates and circulated the announcements. I received a variety of responses. Jewish Americans and Israelis wrote to wish me luck with the project but told me they lacked the courage to set foot on German soil. A Jewish leader I know in the reconciliation field surprised me by writing, “Maybe in my next lifetime I’ll be able to participate in this project...” I pressed on, and eventually our Jewish team came together, with 11 participants 4 facilitators, and a gifted healer who wanted to support us all, emotionally and physically.

Beate and I agreed that the community of Lebensgarten would be the ideal place to host the project. A beautiful ecovillage near Bremen with well over 100 residents, Lebensgarten is a former Nazi ammunition factory which

their 70’s, one of whom told us, “Hitler made me a Jew.” Many of the Jewish participants were of German ancestry.

The next ten days were, simply put, ten of the most inspiring days of my life. By our third day together, as fears and barriers softened, we knew we had become a family – and that nothing could come between us. The words “never again” took on new meaning for me that day...

What follows are vignettes and poetry, written by the participants and facilitators, to provide you with a taste of our experience. I hope that you enjoy our stories, and that you will pass them on. It is truly an honor to share this work with you.

Leah Green, Director  
The Compassionate Listening Project

## Reclaiming My Family

The experience of meeting with Jewish people for reconciliation went far beyond my expectations. There were moments of deep sharing, with tears, holding and comforting each other, sharing the pain that came up when visiting former Jewish places in Berlin, and the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp. And the pain was not only on the Jewish side. I realized what a loss it must have been when all the Jewish people left - had to leave - Germany. Losses of creativity, of love, compassion, like a stream of energy leaving the country with the people.

The most important insight for me is that through this meeting I got that part of my family back... something that was missing without my being aware - a part of my past. I feel so rich now, full of love and full of gratitude.

— Ursel Kamaan, Germany

“I got involved in this work as a German, because I want my country back. I have realized that in order to get my country back fully I need the Jewish people back in my country! So the goal is to make it safe enough and welcoming enough for a million Jewish people to happily live in Germany. This project is a big step towards that. It also gave me back my faith in humanity.”

— Martin Dronsfield, German Facilitator



*“By our third day together, as fears and barriers softened, we knew we had become family, and that nothing could come between us. The words ‘never again’ took on new meaning for me that day.” — Leah Green, USA*

## Fear Not...

On the third night of our project we had a spontaneous celebration of coming back together, a ritual for the painful separation of Jews and Germans. I wrote in my journal that night, “Please God, I saw the image of all the persons standing in front of me, when I closed my eyes, as being the image of you, God. Please let this feeling stay with me in my heart and let it grow.”

I forgot about those words in my journal, but I will never forget the feeling I described. It shook me deeply. I realized I had been so afraid to meet the Jews. I remember Mina

saying, when she introduced herself, “My name is Mina and I am named after my grandmother who died in the gas chambers of the Nazis.” I was paralyzed with fear.

Fear cannot be taken away. It is always a pathway to truth. I learned to walk the path that connects us with our feelings, our bodies, with life. I learned that there is pain involved, but also pure love. I learned that love is so much stronger and what it might mean: Fear not.

— Gabrielle Siels, Germany

*“I was longing for a way to go beyond my shame, fear, grief, hatred... searching for truth and healing. My hopes were met 100%.”*



## Touring Jewish Berlin

*"I think this project is a world-healing and personal-healing miracle. From the moment we started, the healing began..."*

We're now going to take a bus and walking tour of Jewish Berlin. Our guide is German-Israeli. As the neighborhood where we are staying in Berlin is close to the East, we soon enter an area with a lot of new buildings and construction mixed in with old grandiose neoclassical architecture. The bus stops at a nondescript but brand new office building. Inconspicuously, on the wall, are two photographic panels of a baroque style synagogue, one an inside view and the other an outside view. There is historical text explaining that near here stood the synagogue with seating for 1,800 people. We walk behind

the office building and come upon rows of concrete pews and a small grove of trees. These pews are in the exact place where the pews of the synagogue were...the trees mark the spot where the aron kodesh (holy ark) stood. The synagogue was destroyed in Kristallnacht, and then after the war the area was bulldozed by the East Germans. The pews are powerful. The Berliners in our group have never seen this place.

— Mina Cohen, USA



*Memorial at the site of a destroyed Synagogue, Berlin*



*Memorial, Jewish cemetery, Berlin*

## Empty Pews

Two trees  
 A space for the altar between  
 Two trees  
 Reaching to the heavens  
 Two rows  
 Each with 14 white marble slabs for seats.  
 A grass aisle  
 For the path between  
 All is silent  
 All is quiet  
 Only the missing are seen  
 All is silent  
 All is quiet  
 Only the missing are seen

—Rich Hoffman, Jewish Facilitator

*"This experience has exceeded in depth anything I could have known I wished for. I will carry this experience in my heart forever."*

## The Jewish Cemetery

Upon entering the park we find one tombstone - Moses Mendelssohn, and a few bulldozed together in a corner. This had been the largest Jewish cemetery in Berlin...the headstones were bulldozed during the war. We say Kaddish. As we stand silently, first I hear sounds of kids playing in the school yard, and then church bells. Tears come...I sit down, then lie down on the ground...bodies buried under me, sun on my face.

— Mina Cohen, USA

## Honoring Courageous German Women

The Grossen Hamburger Strasse is the oldest Jewish Cemetery in Berlin that was destroyed by the Nazi's in the early 1940s. Adjacent to this hallowed ground is the memorial in the *Rosenstrasse*. This is where the non-Jewish wives involved in officially despised, so-called *Mischeben*, (mixed marriages) demonstrated in 1943. They thereby undermined Goebbel's plan to make Berlin "clean" of Jews. The demonstration came about when one day the women's husbands were all arrested in their places of employment, taken to jail with the intent of ultimate deportation. But the Nazis wanted to avoid public embarrassment and thus the women's protest was successful: the men were released. The unspoken question arises, "What would have happened if also in other places there had been major demonstrations against the deportations?"

— Eve B. Rennebarth, Germany



*Rosenstrasse memorial  
(above and below)*



*Jewish participants sing the  
Sh'ma at Bergen-Belsen  
Concentration Camp*

## Ingrid: A Story of Resistance

*A core part of our project included listening to Germans with widely varying experiences during WWII. These sessions were deeply moving—and healing—for listeners and speakers alike. — Leah*

Ingrid helped Jewish family friends during the war by smuggling money and jewels. Her courageous mother was arrested and imprisoned in Ravensbrück concentration camp through the end of the war. She survived the camp, but barely...

Ingrid's mother was an early resistor. When the Nazis told her she had to have a German flag, she said she didn't have the money...then in 1936 for the Olympics, she bought a 3-story high Olympic flag and flew it from her window.

— Mina Cohen, USA

*"This project is a living model to take to other hot 'rifts,' to invite possibility... Truly awesome!"*



*Beate, Martin and Katarina comfort  
Ingrid as she shares her painful story*



## Sylvia: a Survivor's Story

Sylvia told us how she tried to hold on to her mother when the Nazis came to take her to the gas chamber. Sylvia and her two sisters were rescued from the camp by Mme. Rothschild, and eventually made it to the United States. In 2001 Sylvia returned to Berlin, where her parents lived before the war, and demanded citizenship. "When I went to pick up my new passport, I told the policewoman that I am a Jew who has returned to live in Berlin, and we both cried."

It is quiet in the room when she is finished speaking. Those of us with survivor parents get a hug and we thank her. Sylvia reaches for Beate's hand and extends

her other hand to Stephan. He makes a fist and won't take her hands. His eyes are closed tight.

She gets up, faces him and gets down on her knees in front of him. She forces open his hands and works her way up to his face. She wipes the tears that are now there. One woman is now crying hysterically across the room. Many others have tears as well... After a time we are quiet. We make a tight circle around Sylvia and sing for peace. Stephan, by far the tallest in the group, looks down at Sylvia. She looks so fragile and bird-like next to him. He asks her to take off her glasses, he takes off his and they look at each other in silence as we encircle them.

— Mina Cohen, USA



*Jews were forced by the Nazis to sew a yellow Star of David to their clothing.*



*Sylvia, a child holocaust survivor, encircled by participants after her listening session*



*Former S.S. Soldier, Otto, receives hugs from the group after his session*

## Listening to a Former Nazi

In Berlin we listened to a former SS soldier. Several years ago, Otto dreamt that he was being kicked by people chasing after him, calling him "dirty swine". Realizing he needed to face his past, he began to share his story. He received support from his men's group at church and eventually went to Plum Village in France to study with Buddhist monk, Thich Nhat Hanh. Riveted, we listened to his story: his older brothers joined the Nazi party before him. One of his brothers became a resister after realizing what Hitler was doing, and eventually took his own life. His other brother was killed in Russia, where Otto himself was in many battles and was severely injured in a tank battle. His best friend died in that battle, alongside him.

Otto told us that he now has cancer, and doesn't know how much longer he has to live. One by one, after his story, we embraced him. He told us he had never been in a

room with so much love. Suddenly a Jewish participant, the daughter of Holocaust survivors, began to sob loudly in the corner. Soon she began to scream, releasing the deepest pain I have ever heard. She began to shout: "It's NOT all right! It's NOT all right! You cannot make this all right! Don't tell me it's all right! It's not all right!" Otto stood in our circle as a small group of us surrounded her. Waiting until she calmed down, he took her hand and told her he had no way to ease her pain; he had never been in the presence of such pain. He knelt down on the ground in front of her, held her feet, and said, "I bow to your pain."

Afterwards, her face was so soft. She smiled at us like a small child. She said she didn't know where that emotion came from - that she had been to Auschwitz three times and had not experienced anything like this.

— Brian Berman, Jewish facilitator

## Join us in October 2003!

If you are German- or Jewish-born, we invite your participation in our 2<sup>nd</sup> annual project, October 13 - 23, 2003, in Lebensgarten and Berlin. German participants can register through the German website:

[www.versoehnungsbund.de/listening](http://www.versoehnungsbund.de/listening) and Jewish participants through [www.compassionatelisting.org](http://www.compassionatelisting.org)

We also invite your participation in our Compassionate Listening workshops, advanced training and Mid-East delegations. Please visit our website or call us for more information and registration. Our Compassionate Listening guidebook *Listening With the Heart* and our videos are available for purchase from our website.

## Calendar of Upcoming Events

- May 2003: Introductory and advanced Compassionate Listening workshops, Israel and Palestine
- May 6- June 14: Opening of the Heart: A Photo Exhibition on Compassionate Listening, Hartford MA. Details: [www.openingoftheheart.org](http://www.openingoftheheart.org)
- June 20-22: Compassionate Listening workshop, Houston
- August 1-3: Compassionate Listening workshop, near Seattle
- Sept. 15-29: Israel/Palestine C.L. delegation, open to all!
- Oct. 13-23: German-Jewish reconciliation, Germany
- Oct. 2003: Syria/Lebanon C.L. delegation, open to all!
- Nov. 14-16: Compassionate Listening workshop, Hudson Valley, NY



Gabrielle & Eve

**“It is not possible to express in words, how I feel supported in what I always believed in: that it is necessary to face strong feelings, to express them, to face trauma, even when it is as overwhelming as the Holocaust. And to participate when a whole group of more than 30 is carrying this idea - that was more than I ever expected life would offer to me.**

**Writing this, there is a little concern inside, wondering if I listened enough, if I had room enough for the stories of the Jewish side. Or maybe it is my wish to hear more, because so many questions are still in my heart, waiting for you.”**

—Eve B. Rennebarth, Germany

## Yes! I want to support The Compassionate Listening Project!

Dear Friends: the simple truth is that our efforts are not possible without the financial support of individuals like YOU! We are grateful for your partnership. And we want to make sure you know: there is no such thing as a *small* donation...

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Compassionate Listening Project, PO Box 17, Indianola, WA 98342 USA

*“This was the most wonderful, loving, important project I have ever been a part of. I leave full and connected to myself, to Jewishness, to Jews and Germans. I feel proud to be part of the human race!”*

# Lord's Prayer in Lebensgarten

Miriam Bassuk, Jewish Participant

Attic room full of light,  
the Lord's prayer written  
in careful German letters  
on the back wall.

*Vater unser im Himmel*

Lebensgarten, once a munitions  
factory, now a community  
devoted to peace.

Our circle is thirty-five strong,  
half Germans, half Jews. We  
hold hands, pass the peace feather  
to speak what is most alive in us.

Sound of German translated to  
English, English to German.  
Make space for the wound, now  
layered by several generations, a  
curse that wants to be  
forgotten, yet keeps leaking out.

Together we move the first grief cry  
afraid for so long to release it.  
*Hold me sister, hold me  
brother. Embrace the child in me  
who still can't understand.*

## Berlin:

One swastika scrawled on a wall  
coexists with the many brass plaques  
to recall the names of Jews lost in the  
Holocaust. Jewish schools gated and  
guarded. Site of a synagogue now gone,  
remembered with rows of empty seats.

In an alley, high up on a building  
an artist's rendering of a vulture,  
opens and closes its wings for a coin.

We listen to witnesses  
recount their stories:

Otto, an SS officer, who fought on the  
Russian front; Sylvia, a Jew who lost her  
mother at three. Ingrid and Lilo.  
Impossible to remain unmoved.

A Jewish woman screams, an animal  
sound that shudders on and on. Her  
words, *It's not o.k. It was never o.k.*  
Otto moves toward the circle around  
her, offers his comfort from a distance  
with such soft eyes.

I watch a German man as he  
listens to Sylvia with his fists  
clenched. He doesn't know  
what he would have done,  
and cannot forgive himself.  
Close my eyes, he has boots,  
a shaved head, steel stirrups.  
Open my eyes. He is in pain.

## Bergen Belsen:

Cemetery with mounds for thousands.  
No smoke stack, no ovens, no smell.

I walk alone while the  
trees stand by and watch. The  
sun, radiant earlier is  
shaded by smoky clouds.

## Return to Lebensgarten:

Making love through soft face  
and ready hug. *Come home.*  
*Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive  
those who trespass against us...*  
*Deliver us from evil.*  
Our Father in the Fatherland.

We merge two candlewicks into one  
flame, dance to the sweet song  
we make together.  
*Shalom, Salaam, Peace.*

In Bergen Belsen, I thought  
I saw a dogwood bloom,  
low on the forest floor.

*"This was the most wonderful,  
loving, important project I  
have ever been a part of."*



Return Service Requested

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