

TERRY
SWARTZBERG

With
Chutzpah
and
Kippah

An American Jew's
Discovery of Germany



*For my beloved children Samuel and Anima –
may your passages through life have all the fun
but none of the heartbreak of mine*

ISBN *will follow*

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Contents

About the author

The start of this story (1), July 14, 2011, Augsburg

The start of this story (2), Sukkot 2012 Munich

The start of this story (3), Rosh Hashanah 1957 New York

The first hour: December 1, 2012 – 9.25 am–10.25 am
Munich's Giesing neighborhood

The story finally starts!

The second week: December 8–15

Week three: December 16–23
The kippah finds its audience

Me and my kippah go on the road:
Augsburg, Melbourne, Augsburg, Augsburg, Zwickau,
Annaberg-Buchholz and Berlin

Augsburg (1): Darkness at 5 pm.

Augsburg (2): An E-mail arrives

Melbourne (1 and only)

*The Great Me and My Kippah Adventure:
excursion to Australia*

Back to the E-Mail from Augsburg

Augsburg (3): A walk in the sun

Lunching with the skinheads in Saxony:
Zwickau, Annaberg-Buchholz and Schlettau

Berlin (1, 2 and 3)

Coming home

A tale of two rabbis

A tale of two commandments and three men

Zachor! Capareth! Germany remembers and atones

“You were always a weird outsider”

Growing up weird

“We never thought we would ever have a Jew at our school”

Phulia Tola and Patna, India, 1963–65

Things get even weirder
Oshkosh, Wisconsin 1967–1971

Weird and wonderful encounters in France and Hong Kong

“Only you could go to Germany to become a good Jew”

Proof

Last chapter
April 23, 2015 1.25 pm., Munich

Next chapter

Reference to Website and Ordering Information

About the author



Terry Swartzberg (born on July 22, 1953 in Norwalk, Connecticut) is an American PA (public affairs) campaigner and journalist. He is based in Munich, Germany. He wrote for 25 years to the *International Herald Tribune*. He is especially known for his work for the Stolpersteine and for his “reality check” – since 2012 he has been wearing a kippah in public.

Swartzberg grew up in New York prior to moving with his family to Bihar, India, where his father, a meandering cultural anthropologist, researched village life and Indian wedding feasts on

a long-term basis. While in India, he attended a Jesuit boarding school, where he became – temporarily – a good Catholic.

After studying at (and dropping out of) Brandeis University and in Paris (wine-tasting and fencing), he transferred to the University of Wisconsin-Madison, where he earned that fine institution's first and last B. A. in Asian Urban Studies. In 1976, he became – quite by accident – an investigative journalist in Hong Kong. He spent the following years roaming around Asia and getting into all sorts of predicaments.

He followed that up by becoming editor-in-chief and only staff member of Green Revolution, possibly the worst hippie publication ever produced (and that's saying a lot), and teaching creative writing in a maximum-security penitentiary in Minnesota.

In 1980, he arrived in Berlin, where he launched his long-term relationship with the International Herald Tribune. In 1985, he moved to Munich, where he has lived since.

Since 1999, Swartzberg has been managing director of and resident cook for Swartzberg GmbH. This PA agency stages campaigns to save the climate (for the United Nations and the EU), for the remembrance of the Holocaust, for understanding among religions, for eradication of warfare and other easy-to-achieve items.

Originally a libretto commissioned by Leonard Bernstein, Swartzberg's play *Tzaddik* is based upon the Torah's principle of each generation's having 36 righteous. It uses slapstick comedy, stir-

ring music, litanies and anything else that works to show how humanity repeatedly incites itself to kill.

On December 1, 2012, Swartzberg embarked upon his experiment of wearing a kippah outside of his home and of the Jewish community. His objectives are to counter antisemitism and to ascertain how Germany's society really feels about Jews. Disproving predictions to the contrary, all of his experiences have been positive. His "civil courage" led to one of his kippot's being selected for inclusion in the collection of the Museum of the History of the Federal Republic of Germany in Bonn.

The start of this story (1), July 14, 2011, Augsburg

It is the funeral of the great Mietek Pemper.

It was he that was responsible for Schindler's List (to find out about this incredible and not well-known story, read below).

The ceremony is being held at Augsburg's august Jewish cemetery. It is being presided over by Rabbi Henry Brandt. It is being attended by the leading dignitaries of the city and by Mietek's relatives.

One of them is Gina Pemper, his niece and business partner – and a friend of mine. She has invited me to accompany her to the funeral.

As you would expect, all the men are wearing kippot.

Which I am enjoying.

I have always loved the feeling of having a kippah on my head.

Wearing it makes me feel impeccably Jewish.

Putting it on evokes the feeling I get after I've entered my synagogue of Beth Shalom Munich, which may not be the largest in the world, but which is definitely the most joyous. The drill is always the same: fumble for my kippah, get it on, and start making the rounds of "Chag Sameachs" and "Schabbat Shaloms" as I head towards the buffet, where I will deposit my offering for the Kiddush (joint meal after services).

So, when the brief and very moving funeral is over, and as we are making our ways from the cemetery to the wake-cum-lunch, which will be held at a chic restaurant in downtown Augsburg, I resolve to prolong the feeling of being proudly and unabashedly Jewish by wearing my kippah for a little longer.

As we emerge through the cemetery's gate and on to the broad sidewalk flanking it, where our cars await, the other guests notice that I still have on my kippah.

They start screaming.

“Runter damit – Du gefährdest uns alle!” – “Take it off immediately – you are putting all of us in danger.”

There is sheer panic in their voices.

Their fear leaps over to me. It is the visceral, instinctive Angst of standing out in a hostile world, of being capable of being recognized as Jewish.

This fear is based on the conviction that the world is waiting to prey upon us once this has happened.

I feel the tension rising in my throat. Anxiety sends adrenalin coursing through my body. It sharpens my senses. I start casting furtive glances at passersby for danger.

When suddenly a rational voice in me says “Stop.”

“You have lived in Germany for more than 30 years. You know this country. You have never experienced antisemitism. Racism, yes, definitely – at the hands of bouncers in Berlin convinced that your dark skin made you a Turk, but not antisemitism. So let’s turn off the fear.”

Which I do.

Sooner or later, I give into the pleading of other members of the funeral. I remove the kippah.

Later on, while pondering the day’s events, I am struck – not for the first time – at the dichotomy of Jewish existence in Germany.

When concealed from the world and safely ensconced in our synagogues, schools and cemeteries, we are all exuberantly Jewish. Outside our closed-in little Jewish worlds, we are still determinedly anonymous. We pursue this anonymity because we are convinced that we are – 75 years after the Shoah – in grave danger should anybody find anything that identifies us as being Jewish.

Here’s what I hear every day:

“I don’t dare wear a necklace with a star of David in public.”

“My kids have my surname – it’s Christian – and not that of their Israeli father.”

“We never call it the ‘Sinai School’ in public. It’s public name is the ‘School in the Möhlstraße.’”

“I would never read a Hebrew newspaper in the UBahn (metro).”

“Always look over your shoulder – as inconspicuously as possible – when leaving our synagogue. You never know.”

“75 % of all Germans are anti-Semites. They won’t show it to your face. But they haven’t changed.”

“I forbid my kids to go to Maccabi (the Jewish youth’s athletic organization).”

“When we go to Maccabi, I insist on my kids going separately – safer that way.”

I muse on these comments from my Jewish friends in Germany, and decide that I haven’t come to Germany to live in fear. I set up a dichotomy of my own.

Either Germany is a place in which Jews are safe – or not.

If the former is true, I can keep on living in this country, which I truly love and admire.

If the latter is the case, it’s time for me to leave, and I have been living an unforgivable error for more than 30 years.

A very daring and radical idea begins to take shape in my mind.

Optional but very interesting reading

“The most powerful weapon that you have is your mind. You are never powerless if you have that.”

Mietek Pemper’s life provides proof of that axiom.

In 1939, he – like the rest of the five millions Jews living in Eastern Europe – apparently lost all power over his life.

The Nazis marched into Krakow, Poland’s historic capital, and launched the measures that would result in the extermination of its Jewish population.

Mietek, a studious young man of 19, decided the way to save himself and his family (father, mother and younger brother Stefan – my lady friend Gina’s father) was to learn stenography, as oppressors always need clerks to carry out their persecution. He already spoke excellent German.

His move paid off. Mietek became a clerk for the Judenrat, the council of Jews that the Nazis set up to carry out their barbaric decrees. Mietek used the information gained from rendering their correspondence to shield his family and friends from the worst effects of these decrees. He also used his stenographic skills to transcribe BBC recordings. This samizdat kept the Jews in the ghetto of Krakow informed about the progress of the war.

These skills notwithstanding, the Pempers and the rest of the survivors of the ghetto were shipped in 1943 to the nearby Plaszow

concentration camp. It was run by a man whose name has become a byword for diabolical cruelty – Amon Göth.

You will remember him as the Ralph Fiennes character in “Schindler’s List”.

Mietek’s secretarial skills saved him from gas chambers. It got him the parlous position of serving as Göth’s personal secretary. Considering that Göth was notorious for his homicidal paranoia, it was not, as Mietek wrote in his fascinating autobiography, “a position with a very long life expectancy.”

The position did give Mietek access to the correspondence between the concentration camp, the SS top brass and local manufacturing operations using the camp’s slave labor – one of which was Oskar Schindler’s factory, which produced pots and pans.

In the summer of 1943, by which time the Germans had already killed two million Jews in Poland and surrounding areas, and as the Soviet Army revved up its offensive westwards, the Nazis decided to shut down all operations that were not “decisive for the winning of the war” – and to thus liquidate the remaining 120,000 Jews who were working as slave laborers in them.

Pemper’s brilliant idea: to get Schindler to create a Potemkin village. Using papers faked by Pemper, Schindler issued reports indicating that his factory was producing grenades and other armaments – and that his slave laborers were in fact skilled and thus indispensable technicians.

The list presenting the names and skills of these “technicians” was compiled and typed up by Mietek.

The ruse saved the lives of more than 1,200 persons – including those of Mietek and his family.

Upon the death of his mother in Krakow in 1958, Mietek brought his ailing father to Germany, where Stefan and his family had settled.

It was there that Mietek once more proved his brilliance. Although already 38 years old, and with no experience whatsoever in business, he launched upon a successful career in real estate.

“He was simply the best negotiator anyone has ever seen,” remarked Gina.

I suppose if you can outwit the Nazis, you can out-negotiate anyone else.

Mietek’s innate modesty and discretion kept him from receiving full recognition for his feats. He did receive Germany’s Federal Cross of Merit and other prestigious honors. Mietek was Steven Spielberg’s consultant for Schindler’s List. Mietek’s obituary ran on the front page of all major newspapers.

The greatest and only power you need is that of a bold mind.

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