

[The Generations]

Exploring the Quality of Democracy in Germany

Those "Fighting the Good Fight" Highlighted in Documentary

By Adam Sacks

Imet my wife through the *Litfium*," recalls David Scholem, seated in his cousin's apartment in Berlin. (The building had been bought by an ancestor, expropriated by the Nazis, restored to the family after the war, expropriated once again by the DDR and finally restored to the family after a long effort by his cousin.) It was the last day of a stay in the city dedicated to putting some final touches on his new public television documentary, "Germans and Democracy."

Scholem discovered *As/bau's* personal ads in 1975 when he was living in Australia and "with trust in divine providence," found his wife by placing an ad that read: "Sydney, Australia: Intellectually adventurous Ba'al Tshuva, 25, sparkling personality, joyfully outrageous sense of humor, affectionate, purposeful, considerate and dependable, liberal arts graduate, ex-journalist, TV producer, deutsch-jüdischer Abstammung, considering eventual aliyah, seeks compatible woman 18-25, with the character, adaptability and stamina to make an exemplary marriage." His bride was a New Yorker and that led to a move into the American scene. From there he could confront the stereotypes of Germany and Germans that he now dissects in his documentary.

David, a first cousin once removed of the famed German-Jewish Kabbalah scholar, Gershom Scholem, describes the work he does as "beast watch," a term he coined himself. Like today's Germans themselves, he is on watch for the beast their country used to be. Is the beast dead or just sleeping? His goal is to capture on video a personal and critical portrait of the state of German democracy and in that way contribute to understanding among peoples and nations.

The effort evolved out of his family story. His father manifested the "Berlin syndrome." Though forced to flee in 1936, he never fully left the city psychologically. Scholem puts it this way: "You could take the Jew out of Berlin, but not Berlin out of the Jew." After the war, during which he served in the South African Army in Montgomery's campaigns, his father yearned to be back where he felt truly at home. He spent his last 23 years in Berlin's Leo Baeck Home, finished his medical studies and added new generations to his social circle.

Scholem recalls those who assembled at his father's Weißensee funeral three years ago. There were perhaps only five or six Jews out of a crowd of thirty. The others were visibly gripped by a particularly deep sadness, as if they had a crack in their soul. The son of the departed realized that his father was the first Jew to whom they had been able to give their final respects.

Questions stemming from this experience resulted in previous versions of the documentary. The impressionistic "Berlin Echoes" gave way to "Never Again? Cutting Both Ways" as Scholem delved deeper into the question: "Who are today's Germans?" He realized that the human story was part of a larger political story: "How does a mandated democracy, established under the gun by occupation powers on a population accustomed in its marrow to obedience, not to individuality, evolve and come into reality?" From a micro perspective, "Germans and Democracy" seeks to probe the authenticity and quali-



David Scholem, producer of the public television documentary "Germany and Democracy."

ty of Germans' inner democratic feeling.

The two-part documentary is the result of over 60 interviews with people Scholem describes as representative—not necessarily of Germany—but of democratic Germany. He is interested in the people who are "fighting the good fight." He captures the essence of his questions when he asks, "are the democrats democratic?"

Scholem is scathing about early German post-war democracy which suited the Allies, and which he describes as democratic architecture fleshed out with undemocratic persons, "people more comfortable clicking their heels than scratching their brains." He focuses on the raw reality of complex circumstances, namely that the reason Germans became democrats is that they were ordered to do so.

The other focus of his film is the ethical and humanistic challenge of engaging with individuals whose father or grandfather was involved in atrocities and who now suffer shame and sorrow for what their family did. David Scholem interviewed, and even developed friendships with, conscience-afflicted children and grandchildren of some of Hitler's most notorious accomplices. Through the course of his interviews, Scholem sensed that he was a very "inside" outsider—an Orthodox Jew from New York, wearing a kippa, speaking fluent German without an accent, approaching his interviewees non-judgmentally, and examining questions central to the German mindset. His conversation partners are often astonished when Scholem asks

them what it's like to be a German now, without any insinuation.

Scholem's contact with those he interviews is intense and he gets them to talk about things they never

dared express, yet were yearning to be asked. As both a "naive Australian" and a "card-carrying member of the Tikun Olam club," Scholem doesn't shy away from what is often avoided. "Germans have an unsolvable guilt in front of Jews," he says, "and I come as a kippa-wearing Jew saying it's not your fault speak to me."

Scholem mentions his conversation with Jörg Fischer who, before he bailed out from the neo-Nazi scene, worked with movement leaders Dr. Gerhard Frey and Franz Schönhuber, and helped develop the strategy of the *Nationale befreite Zonen* (National Liberated Zones). This strategy, largely successful, has succeeded in making several small towns and areas of the former DDR off-limits to foreigners, tourists and anyone who stands out.

Scholem's point is that he wouldn't have spoken with Fischer when he was still a neo-Nazi. In his work, he feels obliged to "hug people who have woken up from a nightmare they still have to live with." As he sees it, "When my people emerged from the nightmare, in a sense they could relate to it 'there'—as if 'there' were at a distance, but there is no distance from 'there' in Germany. 'There' is everywhere when you live here, and people just have to live with it."

Scholem is also concerned about the nature of German-Jewish relations today. Jews are again a presence in Germany, but somehow a cloistered one. They have an iconic

quality, and rather than being well-integrated into German life and mixing with ordinary Germans, they have a special space in relation to what is German. To Scholem, the broad public ad campaign for "tolerance" of "others" smacks of an act of grace from a superior to an inferior. He agrees, however, that it has been used as an effective instrument for giving the idea good currency, especially among former East Germans.

Scholem makes the point that each democracy grows out of the soil of the society in which it functions. German democracy is like the *Soziale Marktwirtschaft*, where all change is maddeningly slow. He sees Germany in today's Europe as the oversized teenager on a continent of grown-ups and old-fogies, and at the same time the biggest gorilla on the block with a terrible reputation.

In his work, Scholem seeks to give wide exposure to a new picture of Germans today for audiences in the English-speaking world. He hopes to get financing for the final stage of production in time to have the premiere coincide with January 30th 2003, the 70th anniversary of the eclipse of democracy in Germany. The different terms used to refer to this date in Germany are themselves political. *Machtergreifung* (seizure of power) versus *Machtübergabe* (handing over of power) registers an entirely different understanding of the event. The former suggests that the Germans were victims of aliens, the latter underscores the guise of legality. Scholem's lesson here is that legality shouldn't be confused with democracy, and the challenge is to recognize what is democratic.

Those who want to support this production should contact David Scholem via email at producer@germans-and-democracy.com. Readers may also wish to visit the web site at www.germans-and-democracy.com

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