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JEWISH CEMETERY DESECRATIONS IN GERMANY

By Deidre Berger

Last month at Sachsenhausen, a former Nazi concentration camp in Germany, Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder pledged, in the presence of Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak, that Germany would combat anti-Semitism and racism. His speech underscored the importance of memory for modern Germany.

Two weeks later there was virtually no public response to the most extensive desecration of a Jewish cemetery in Germany since World War II. The attack was widely reported in Germany, but no major government official condemned the overturning of 103 gravestones at Berlin's Weissensee cemetery. There were no public demonstrations to draw attention to the defilement of the largest Jewish cemetery in Europe.

In fact, the Berlin police have designated the Weissensee attack an ordinary incident of vandalism, not an act of anti-Semitism or right-wing extremism, simply because no relevant graffiti was found at the site.

One notable exception to this apparent lack of concern was a reading of the names on the overturned tombstones, organized by the local Green Party and attended by several dozen local politicians and church leaders, at the cemetery.

Perhaps in a country where desecrations of cemeteries, both Jewish and non-Jewish, occur with some regularity, the shock of such outrages has worn off. But one should not ignore the fact that in the country that planned and executed the Holocaust, any desecration of a Jewish cemetery is an act of overt anti-Semitism.

For Jews, cemeteries are sacred grounds, and Jews are obligated to maintain their sanctity for all time.

Thus, the continuing pattern is disturbing. There were 32 Jewish cemetery desecrations in Germany in the first eight months of 1999. Between 1990 and 1998, German officials recorded yearly totals of between 26 and 111 incidents. In Berlin alone during the past 18 months, there were 5 desecrations of Jewish cemeteries, including a bomb attack on the grave of the former leader of the German Jewish community, Heinz Galinski. That attack led the late Ignatz Bubis, Galinski's successor, to declare that he would prefer to be buried in Israel, where he now is buried.

As in the case of the Galinski grave attack, police have found no trace of the perpetrators of this month's massive grave desecration.

Because the Weisensee cemetery was closed for the Jewish holiday of Succoth, when the graves were vandalized, the exact timing of the attack may never be known. But it occurred on the weekend when Joerg Haider's extremist Freedom Party rose to new electoral heights as it came in second in Austria's national elections.

As long as no culprits for the cemetery destruction are found, suspicions will remain that their behavior was fueled by political developments in Austria. There are clear feelings of identification of many conservative Germans with Haider's Freedom Party. The day following the Oct. 3rd election, the governor of the important German state of Bavaria advised the Austrians to include the Freedom party in the new government. This endorsement of Haider is a chilling reminder of the resonance of Adolf Hitler in Munich and other parts of Bavaria.

While Jewish communal institutions are generally well guarded in Germany, the number and size of the country's Jewish cemeteries makes it nearly impossible to provide around-the-clock protection. The president of Berlin's Jewish community, Andreas Nachama, has called for the installation of video cameras in cemeteries to improve security conditions.

That recommendation is an understandable attempt to reduce the number of attacks and increase the likelihood of finding the responsible criminals. However, it is unlikely to be instituted, due to concerns about respecting the peace and dignity of a burial site. A more likely remedy will be increased police patrols as well as appeals to neighbors for more vigilance in reporting incidents at cemeteries.

Even more fundamental in combating such shattering events would be encouraging – and expecting – public rejection of such behavior. As long as cemetery desecrations are greeted largely by silence, perpetrators feel emboldened to continue their attacks.

The best defense is not more police and security but civil courage and public condemnation. Democracy has gained a firm foothold from the Atlantic to the Ural in Europe but vigilance is necessary to prevent its destabilization.

This remains an essential lesson of memory from the Holocaust. As the Weisensee cemetery destruction reminds us, stones are silent. They can only bear witness. It is people who need to raise their voices.

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