

CIF International and the German “Zeitgeist” in the Fifties

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Ever since I have been a member of CIF the thought that intrigues me is: from where did the Germans of those years take the courage and the conviction, together with Henry Ollendorff and three non-German colleagues, to found an association like the Council of International Fellowship?

In 1960 I was just 16 years old, a child of the war, and I grew up, like the half of my classmates, without a father. In school I learnt about the enormous guilt my parents and grandparents had taken upon themselves. It was – and still is – to me unbelievable to understand what took place in this country before I was born. While I grew up many cities still lay in ruins. The German soul likewise was shattered; today we call such a state a post-traumatic stress disorder. The enormous suffering, which we brought into the world, made me on one hand angry, on the other hand also helpless and speechless, especially when meeting foreigners. Speechless we were also in our own families, for we realized that our parents did not find words for the past happenings, instead they simply wanted to forget the past.

In 1960 I started travelling to other countries, besides harbouring feelings of shame in me; I also felt rejection in the contact with people from other countries. There were even situations in which I was shouted and left standing alone. It was clear, as a German I was not welcome. Also other friends of my generation have shared their similar experiences with me. Even in the CIP program some Germans have been ridiculed as *Nazi-Pigs*. Wolfgang Hamberger describes these experiences in his book “Fascination America”. These members of the CIP were children during the war, in contrary to me they had conscious memories of the war and also suffered under the trauma of the war.

Today I know, it were not the personal experiences with Germans as such, it was the pure fear of the suspected claim of Germans to power and dominance that led to the above behaviour.

This fear of the European neighbours appeared again once more in 1989, when the reunification of Germany took place (Michael Wolfssohn: “Keine Angst vor Deutschland”)

With this very personal introduction I have started to give you an idea of the *Zeitgeist of the Fifties*. And indeed I have deliberately decided to view this theme from a personal angle.

But before I go any further, I would like to say a few words about this term **Zeitgeist**, indeed this German word is being used in many other languages.

The exact translation for the word “Zeitgeist” is “spirit of the time”, yet Zeitgeist is more than just the spirit of the time, it also concerns the intellectual, moral and cultural climate of the epoch. The *Zeitgeist* is the way of thinking and feeling of a particular epoch. And as you have gathered, it is my intent to focus on the way of feeling in Germany in the Fifties

Journey to The Social Situation of the Fifties

In the Fifties Germany was a so-called *Fatherless Society*. Many men had died in the war, or were taken as prisoners. The last prisoners of war returned as late as 1955 back to their home country. Often the psychologically and physically wounds that the war had branded on them made them more burden for their families. The divorce rate soared up, the orphanages were full of children that were still searching for their parents or had lost them already.

During the war and in the years following, women, many of who were homeless, had to make sure that their children would survive. They were the ones who cleaned up the rebels and cleared the bombed- out cities. And they had to make sure that society would continue.

The rise in the economy of the country, the birth of the so called *economical miracle* came about in the Fifties. The economic growth was nearly a yearly 10%, full employment and a lack of workers was the result. We learnt about washing machines, record-players and about fridges.

There was a great longing for homeliness and tranquillity. The films and fiction of this time mirror this trend in the society.

The rise in divorces (before the war 8%, after the war 25%) led also to development of a particular ideal family that was propagated in the society. The family was seen as the ideal form of living and also as the only form that provides sufficient security and safety for the members of the society. Schools for brides were opened and young women could learn how to satisfy the needs of their future husbands.

A woman was not meant to delve into self-realization. She was not even allowed to take up a job or have her own bank account without the consent of her husband. (Merlind Theile: “Aufbruch ins Gestern”)

The Fifties also saw the rise of the so called *Cold War*. Germany was already divided, the mines and meshed wire accentuated the division between the two Germany’s. In 1961 the Wall in Berlin was built. Families too were torn apart again; visiting the other Germany became increasingly difficult.

Also the war- torn nations of West Europe opened up very slowly to one another, exchange-programs between school students and city – partnerships, as we know them today, were virtually unknown.

Reflection of their immediate past, let alone mourning about its horrors and tragedies was unheard among the Germans of the Fifties. Only in the 60's, the Psycho - analytics Margaret and Alexander Mitscherlich published a book on this theme, provoking the Germans with the statement that they were unable to reflect about their own past. ("The Inability of Germans to Mourn ")This much needed process of mourning simply did not take place in Germany of the Fifties.

It was only later that the so called 68th *Generation* and the students of the Revolution tried to start a process of discussion with their parents and grandparents. In the 80's this topic was yet again taken up in the society, but this time Ralph Giordano ("Die zweite Schuld – oder Von der Last ein Deutscher zu sein") describes the burden of being German and examined the possibility of clearing the late generations of the guilt of their forefathers. Dan Bar- On shows in his book, "The Legacy of Silence ", which he wrote after many talks with the children of the Nazi- perpetrators, how the silence had shifted into the second generation and what a psychological burden it was even for the generations following.

Subsequently we were occupied with the material development of the new nation, and we were too occupied with ourselves to open up to the other Nations in the West.

The Opening to France was the first step in the direction of international understanding and was consolidated in the German -French Friendship Treaty of 1963. Since the French themselves were unable to grapple with their own state of fear, it is quite understandable, that it took so long for this opening to take place.

In this time, Henry Ollendorf, a man of Jewish origin, who had to emigrate from the Germany in the Nazi period, stretched out his hands to us, even in the wake of the guilt of our parents. Some German CIP- participants of the first generation described the tension between the Germans and participants from other countries. Some participants, I was told, even refused to speak to the Germans. Henry perceived their rejection and he built up constructive dialogues between the participants so that the rejection could be broken.

When Henry- together with Gisela Sennsfelder -developed the idea to found an international association, some Germans reacted with scepticism. After the Nazi past they were sick of all the rules and regulations of German associations.

CIF International was founded and my answers to the question: where did the founders find the courage and the conviction to do such an incredible step are the following:

- With the help of Henry Ollendorff and the three non -German CIP participants, these Germans got the early chance to grapple with the German guilt – theme.

- All CIF / CIP participants have worked in their youth as social workers or as youth workers, because it was their mission to found a different more democratic society other than the one they had evolved from.
- They were open and eager to get to know other cultures and this eagerness and their experiences they passed on to the other members of CIF.
- They had a great urge to propagate international understanding and cooperation.

The founders of the CIF were really pioneers, they went out into the world, they took up the challenges that the Germans had inherited from their past and simultaneously built bridges to people of other nations in a way which hardly seemed possible at that time.

They were much ahead of their time.

Thanks to these founders CIF- International became a world-wider platform for the encounter of the cultures, for international understanding and for intercultural social work.

I have great respect of this achievement, especially in the wake of the *Zeitgeist* in Germany at that time.

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