

REVIEW

Mimi Schwartz

Good Neighbors, Bad Times: Echoes of My Father's German Village

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Many years ago Elie Wiesel observed: "The mystery of goodness far exceeds the mystery of evil." Mimi Schwartz, the American-born daughter of a refugee father from the village of Benheim (not its real name), Germany, has written an evocative memoir that explores the goodness of certain of the village's Christians during the Holocaust. She seeks answers to two related questions: what accounted for the amity of Jewish-Christian relations in this small Black Forest community of 1200 people, 30 percent of whom were Jewish, and how can she understand herself as an assimilated American Jewish woman in relationship to Holocaust history and its aftermath? Her memoir is an elegantly written and intellectually honest response to these questions as she attentively listens to the contemporary echoes of the Holocaust.

Schwartz, Professor Emerita at Richard Stockton College, is a perceptive and keen observer. Her late father, Arthur Lowengart, along with his brothers, devised an ingenious plan to smuggle cash to Switzerland in order to flee Benheim in 1936. Living in Queens, New York, he would constantly say that in Benheim "It was self-understood" that one helped one's neighbors. As a young girl, the author was neither interested in nor curious about her father's lost world. As a mature woman, she feels a strong sense of urgency to catch up with the past "before everyone who knew that world is gone" (p.3). Thus, *Good Neighbors* is a sensitive second generation reflection on goodness, denial, and ordinary people; it is also a memoir that records memory's jarringly discordant perceptions.

Divided into four parts, Schwartz's book reflects her engagement with Benheim's Jews living in America and Israel, and the town's Christians residing in Germany. The author focuses on the "small stories, the ones that history has no time for as it paints the broad brushstrokes of the past" (p. xv). While not forsaking the historical records, her quest is animated by her role as a storyteller rather than an historian. She writes: "I liked how one person's memory bumped another, muddying the moral waters of easy judgment" (p. xvi). If memory and an exploration of Christian motivation to help their fellow Jewish citizens form two legs of this memoir, certainly food is the third leg. Schwartz's interviews invariably involved a kaffeeklatsch replete with linzertorte. "Food," she writes, "triggers nostalgia" (p.104). The author even includes a recipe for *Berches*, a type of potato bread that was given by certain Benheim Jews to their Christian neighbors.

Schwartz lists eighteen examples of Christian altruistic acts on behalf of the Jews of Benheim. The number eighteen is symbolically fraught, being the numerical equivalent of the Hebrew word for life, (*chai*). Among these acts are: The policeman saved two Torahs; The barber cut Jewish hair under the sign *No Jews Allowed Here*; The farmer's daughter cleaned house, washed, and brought food to her old Jewish neighbor; The shopkeeper gave food over the back fence at night; At least ten neighbors helped a half-Jewish family survive for five years; The rest let them be; The three nuns kept helping the Jews until the nuns were transferred; The beloved mayor

kept helping the Jews until he was transferred; Christians paid back debts to Jews even though the law said they didn't have to; The priest spoke out against what was happening to the Jews in a sermon. He was reprimanded (pp. 234-235).

Larger towns and cities had no similar enviable record of Christians who believed that they were their brother's keepers.

Mimi Schwartz's memoir affirms, however, the contradictory behavior of Christians during the war. Some Christians helped Jews whom they knew and liked. Her father's business friend in Frankfurt turned Hitler's picture to the wall whenever Arthur Lowengart visited and joyfully proclaimed: "For my good Jewish friend, Arthur" (p. 65). Yet some Germans were both helpers and murderers. The head of the Stuttgart Gestapo saved Mimi's Uncle Fritz, with whom he had played cards for twenty years. However, he subsequently "rounded up thousands of Jews he didn't know personally for deportation" (p.65). This moral ambiguity is eternally perplexing and underscores the elusive nature of the mystery of goodness. While it is true that pre-war friendship played a role in whether a person became a rescuer, it was far from decisive.

There is an exquisite irony attending one of the acts of Christian help. The Jewish youth group and the Hitler Youth group met in the same building every Friday night. Because Jewish law proscribed turning lights on or off on Shabbat, the leader of the Hitler youth would "come downstairs and do that for them" (p.194). Mimi hears this story in Israel while eating linzertorte, served by Gretl, the widow of the founder of Oleh Zion [not its real name], the Israeli kibbutz settled by some fourteen Benheim Jewish families who escaped the village. Gretl draws a distinctive lesson from the story. On the one hand, "This kind of cooperation was so typical in our village" (p.194). However, on the other hand, it is precisely because of this that "our parents did not see the dark shadows coming up, but we, the young people did see them...We decided that if we wanted to survive...the only place to go was our ancient homeland of Eretz Israel" (pp. 194-195).

Some Christians in Benheim helped because "it was self-understood" that they should. Christians buried the rescued Torah scrolls near the village's Jewish cemetery. After the war, the scrolls were unearthed. Mimi's interviews revealed the fact that one of the scrolls was sent to America and is now in Burlington, Vermont. The second is in the Israeli kibbutz, located north of Acre, established by Benheim Jews. The author's attachment to this kibbutz is both historical—it's part of the story of the Holocaust—and personal; her father chose to be buried there.

Mimi's intrepid journey is aided by several Germans representing the generation of the Holocaust and the second and third generations afterwards. Herr Adolf Stolle, "a decent man [and] a good Gentile contact" (p.75), according to the Benheimers living in America interviewed by the author, has researched Benheim's old Jewish cemetery. He has sent photographs of family graves to Benheim's Jews living in New York, and is Mimi's principle guide in Germany. She is also aided by Rolf (the third generation), a graduate student at the University of Mannheim doing research on how the Holocaust could have happened in Germany. Rolf tells Mimi that she cannot trust people's stories, "even if they are willing to talk honestly to you. And most are not" (p.78). Only the Town Hall archives will yield the "real information" (p.78). This leaves Mimi somewhat perplexed because of the eight Benheim Jews she has interviewed, "all blamed Germany, but not their Benheim neighbors" (p.78). She tells Rolf that her main interest is "how decent people remember and live with the past" (p.79).

Two second generations come together as Mimi speaks with Otto Stolle, Herr Stolle's son, who teaches German history in a multicultural high school. Mimi notes that both the Jewish and German second generations "grew up with our parents' secrets and silences, we live with them, but we don't own them" (p.122). Comparing the son to the father, Mimi observes that the second generation is more honest and less "guarded about prejudice" than Benheim's old timers (p.123). Otto shares that responses to the query, "What did you do when the Nazis were in power?" ran the gamut from those [including the new Nazi mayor of Benheim] who thought it was okay to persecute the Jews, to those who were indifferent, to those who spoke up, one of whom did so in church (p.127). The author frequently hears a recurring phrase, *You can't imagine the times*, from all who were there during the Shoah.

Of the many people the author interviews, several stand out as crucial guides on her quest to understand why some were "good neighbors." Katherine of Dorn, located near Benheim, is committed to telling the story of what happened in Germany during the Holocaust. Katherine analogizes this responsibility to the telling of the Exodus: "Like the Jews telling the story of leaving Egypt and being delivered from slavery, so we have to tell this story of Germany and never forget" (p.166). Her grandfather was a staunch anti-Nazi whose acts of resistance included secret meetings, to which area priests came, to listen to the BBC. But Katherine's furniture included items that had belonged to Jewish families; Mimi feels revulsion for these items that she terms "trophies of history" (p.171). Katherine tells Mimi that the Jewish owners of this furniture "begged us to buy from them so they'd have money to leave" (p.171)..

Willy Weinberger, now living in Baltimore, is one of two Benheim Jews who survived the Holocaust. A deeply religious man, Willy deepens Mimi's understanding of Jewish-Christian relations in Benheim. Willy recalls his father cleaning manure off the streets on Saturday night so they would be clean for Sunday church: "We didn't want our horses' droppings to upset them" (p.144). The women in his family made thick potato soup for non-Jewish neighbors. Consequently, for Benheim's Jews kindness toward gentiles transcended etiquette, "it was a survival technique" (p.144). His mother brought this soup to a neighbor every time she had another child, "Eight of them!" (p.144). One of the woman's sons, nonetheless, threw stones at the Weinberger house after Kristallnacht, prompting Willy's father to say: "You see, you didn't make enough soup!" (p.144). Schwartz rightly identifies levity as a survival technique.

Willy's story reveals the complexity of staying alive during the reign of increasing Nazi terror. On the one hand, he received crucial assistance: a farmer was willing to hide him; the mayor's assistant saved his father from Dachau; a policeman's wife brought Willy's mother extra food; Herr Damon bought his father's house for a fair price; the servant girl said nightly prayers with Willy in Hebrew. Later, after her marriage, she gave Willy and his father an orange, which in those days was "like gold" (p.143). On the other hand, Willy points to the poisonous effects of Nazi mis-education on the children. While most of the older Benheimers, with one ignoble exception, did not change their behavior toward the Jews, their children were taught to hate Jews. Willy makes an analogy to the contemporary Middle East, rightly claiming that Palestinian children are "also indoctrinated to hate the Jews" (p.141).

"Celebration," the book's ironically titled final chapter, is a wrenching account of the truism that the Holocaust has very few happy outcomes. Benheim's former synagogue, now a church, has been restored. It is to be a place where Christians pray and remember their former Jewish neighbors (p.244). There is a band, there are speakers including Mayor Himmel, Mimi Schwartz, the bishop and a cantor, among others. Letters of support are read. This celebration of reconciliation takes place against the rising tension between Germans and Turks, who are excluded. But it is the pathos of 70-year-old Tante (aunt) Gaby that defines the endless pain of

the Holocaust. She cries out for her murdered mother and brother: “Meine Mutti, Meine Bruder” (p.257). No reconstruction here. No closure to the mourning.

Mimi Schwartz has written a memoir that is important for both Jews and Christians to read. Her quest provides a template for all who wish to confront the mystery of goodness. Furthermore, she juxtaposes events of goodness then—the 5,000 villagers of LeChambon sur Lignon, 300 miles south of Paris, who saved 5,000 Jews during the Holocaust—and the non-Jewish residents of Billings, Montana now, who rallied to show solidarity with their Jewish neighbors targeted by hate groups. These groups disappeared. She muses that if more people knew the good stories, “no matter how small, might not more of us find courage to follow suit?” (p.238). Schwartz would doubtless endorse the call of Rabbi Kook, the first Chief Rabbi of the Yishuv [nascent Jewish state of Israel], who urged his followers to pursue “causeless love.”

Despite some minor errors (Mishnah is misspelled as Misnah, Martin Luther’s vicious pamphlet *On the Jews and their Lies* appears as *On the Jews and their Lives*), the author deserves our gratitude for her courage, her balance, and her quest. It is a defining characteristic of many in the second generation to undertake a pilgrimage to the European birthplaces of parents and to Israel.¹ It is no small irony that, in my view, she could not be more mistaken about the nature of her own work when she confides to a Jewish interlocutor in Zurich that the book she is writing is “not a Holocaust book” (p.214). Her goal is different; “I’m really more interested in how good people lived through and with Germany’s past. And what that has to tell me, us, about our lives today” (p.214). Consequently, *Good Neighbors, Bad Times* is very much a Holocaust book in that it chronicles the sinuous and insidious legacy of trauma left in the wake of the *Shoah* while challenging its readers to demand that they care about others.