**Interview with Dr. Martin Kloke**

Martin Kloke, PhD, born in Korbach (North Hessen), is 59 years old, married, and has one adult son. He works as an editor of educational media in Berlin, and is responsible for the subjects Ethics, Philosophy, and Religion. Martin Kloke has been living in Berlin for 24 years.

**What is your personal motivation to be in such a close touch with Jews and Jewish communities in Germany?**

I grew up in a protestant environment. The people around me exerted a philosemitic and pro-Israel influence on me. My fundamental stance has become somewhat more complex over the time, but the engagement with the Shoah, with the perpetrators and victims in my surroundings, as well as numerous encounters and experiences in Israel initiated some elementary processes of reflection and thought on the issue. When I began my studies in the late 1970s, fanatic anti-Semitism was thriving in the left-wing student scene at my university in Gießen. Being left-wing and being opposed to Israel, was almost like two sides of the same coin. When I went to Israel for six weeks in 1979 and spent most of the time working in a Kibbutz, I was very shocked to meet people who had fought as Guerilleros against the Argentinian Junta only years before, and who had found sanctuary in Israel. This cognitive dissonance wouldn’t let me go. In left-wing German identity debates at that time, you would hear things like “German history’s reach extends to Palestine”, or “Israel – the bridgehead of American Imperialism”. I began questioning the narratives of my left-wing fellow students, learnt about and for the first time came to understand Zionism as a Jewish emancipatory movement. This process led, in what in retrospect seems an almost inevitable manner, to my doctoral dissertation on the relationship of the German Left to Israel. At the same time, I got involved with educational projects fighting anti-Semitism and sharing my newly won insights with others. Since then, I’ve continuously engaged with the history of German-Israeli and Christian-Jewish relations, and writing journal and academic articles on those subjects.

**Where do you feel at home, and how do you feel in your city of residence?**

Berlin is the place where I’ve lived the longest, and I feel at home here. I am also always glad to visit Israel again, even though I’ve never lived there for a longer period of time.

**What are your hopes and expectations from friendships and close cooperation with Jews and Israelis?**

There are Jews and non-Jews among my friends; friendships develop irregardless of cultural or religious heritages. Rather, it has to do with where I spend most of my time, with whom I interact with on a daily basis, where and towards whom I develop sympathies and a sense of trust.

**There is a considerable Jewish community in Berlin. How would you describe the relations between the Jewish community and the non-Jewish surrounding?**

There is a network of contacts and co-operation between the Jewish community and a small number of non-Jewish interested individuals – activists of a religious or secular nature, friends of Israel, academics. Significant organisations include the German Israeli Society (DIG), the Society for Christian-Jewish Cooperation (GCJZ) and other non-governmental organisation (NGOs) that ensure the continuation of these relationships. The majority of non-Jewish society doesn’t participate in these things, or does so only to a small degree.

The Society for Christian-Jewish Co-Operation has dedicated itself to dialogue for more than seventy years. Working alongside them are Christian communities that try to coming to terms with the anti-Jewish elements of their own traditions through the yearly Israel Sunday, dialogue with Jewish initiatives, or co-operation in a spiritual sense. There are also attempts at interreligious trialogues, such as the project of the ‘House of One’ in Berlin – an ambitious project which shall involves a mosque, a church and a synagogue under a single roof. Yet the acceptance of such initiatives in the religious mainstream leaves a lot to be desired. The historical and current political differences between the religions are large, especially given that there are more than just a few mosques that are influenced by the ideologies of political Islam.

**How do you see the perspectives of Jewish life in Berlin in the long run?**

On the one hand, Berlin is still a magnet for thousands of young Israelis who want to live here, be it on a short-term or a long-term basis. On the other hand, the increasingly pronounced anti-Semitism as well as the somewhat unfortunate age demographics of the Jewish community are chipping away at the substance of Jewish life in the city. There is the danger that Jewish communities will not flourish in the way that many of us in German society and politics would like. Jewish life in the future will certainly be more diverse in religious and cultural terms than it has ever been before, but the period of quantitative growth is over. If the open anti-Semitism should increase further, we could see the beginning of similarly terrifying migratory developments like those seen in Malmo or Paris.

**In which way, do you think, are politicians and society supporting the re-building of organized Jewish life in Berlin?**

There’s a bipartisan attempt in Berlin to foster and support Jewish life in the city, as part of the purpose of the new German state after the Shoah. This can be seen in the construction and re-construction of synagogues, the creation of Jewish schools and other educational institutions (such as the Chabad educational centre), or by protecting Jewish institutions from antisemitic attacks. Support for Jewish life is also positively commented upon and received in most of the media.

**Are Jews and non-Jews cooperating regarding commemoration of the Jewish history in Berlin/Germany, on World War II and the Shoah?**

At yearly commemorative ceremonies and events, Jews and non-Jews commemorate the horrors of the past, in large part together. The 9th of November, the 27th of January and the 8th May are examples. This also happens in between, when new “Stolpersteine” are laid in front of the apartments or houses in which Jews previously lived before they were deported and murdered. But also in this setting, on the non-Jewish side, it is primarily official representatives of state and society, as well very engaged activists, who partake in such events and commemorate together with the Jewish community. Most members of non-Jewish society participate in these events only on a minimal level, if at all.

**How are Jewish topics discussed in the German mainstream media?**

Jewish topics, for example cultural events (such as the Jewish film festival) or religious festivals in public (such as Channukah), are addressed in the media and tend to be commented upon positively in light of the past, but reports about growing anti-Semitism in Germany and Berlin do tend to dominate. Parts of the media give up its friendly stance as soon as it has to do with Israel, however; then the tone of reporting changes, and Israel’s policies towards Palestine tend to be condemned in a one-sided manner, without addressing the background issues. The same media outlets that complain about “new” anti-Semitism in other contexts, more often than not apply double moral standards in their reporting on the Middle East, which in the end leads to a delegitimization and demonisation of Israel, and thereby fans the flames of Israel-related anti-Semitism.

**Is the Judeo-Christian Occident a myth for you, a kind of dream, or a real thing, or let’s say: a real opportunity?**

In relation to the past, the phrase of ‘Judeo-Christian West’ is a chimeric idea that has little to do with reality, to the point of almost being cynical. In the present moment and for the future, the development of a Judeo-Christian tradition is an undertaking that could build upon historical roots; for this to become more than just a pleasant dream, one would first need to solidly embed the battle against all forms of anti-Semitism in state and society.

**Do Jews play an active role in public life and society in your city?**

Yes, very much so, although the public engagement of Jewish individuals will, given the proportions and numbers, never have a larger social significance. Nonetheless – there are some “construction sites” where Jewish individuals and institutions get involved in a successful manner. Two examples; in this year’s election to the European Parliament, Berlin’s politician from the Green party, Sergey Lagodinsky, won a seat, and he is also an active member of the Berlin’s Jewish community. Another example; in the realm of education, the Central Council of Jews in Germany has worked together with the Culture Ministers of the Bundesländer and textbook publishers to ensure that Jews and Judaism of the past and present are represented in a fairer manner than has been common till now in educational materials.

**Is there a current problem with anti-Semitism in your city/country? If so, what kind of activities are in progress to combat it?**

Anti-Semitism is an unbearable disaster for the political culture of this country, because it’s virulent in all social and political milieus. One of the numerous manifestations of anti-Semitism includes making ‘the Jews’ responsible for the real or imagined mistakes of Israel. Alongside the traditional forms of anti-Semitism among the political Right, we have seen a specific hatred of Jews become more wide spread on the political Left and in the so-called ‘middle ground’, which is otherwise at home in largely Muslim migrant settings. This primarily anti-Israeli anti-Semitism has roots in both Europe and the Qur’an. As a result, it is often not taken seriously in mainstream society, or is simply silently “tolerated”, in part because antizionist ressentiments are widespread in the liberal mainstream, and in part because right-wing populist tendencies abuse “Islam” as a projection screen for anti-Muslim racism. One can of course debate whether anti-Semitism really is increasing or not. But one thing is for sure: hatred of Jews is showing its face more shamelessly and brutally than ever before.

Politicians, society, and administrative authorities are reacting to the new offensive of the Jew haters in a partly uncoordinated and helpless manner. Now, commissioners for anti-Semitism are being appointed left and right, educational programmes are being established, prevention programmes are being brought to life, all which are desperately trying to address the problem. Communal and Länder parliaments (recently also the Bundestag) have delivered resolutions – at last – against the antizionist boycott movement BDS. Many media outlets have also shown themselves to be more sensitised to anti-Semitism than they were only a few years ago. Whether this development will lead to a long-lasting defusion of the problem of anti-Semitism is something that we’ll have to wait and see about.

**What do you think is the place of Israel in the lives of European Jews?**

Israel is the geo-political and spiritual centre of contemporary Jewish existence – the prospering democratic country is a visible expression of Jewish state sovereignty in a region that is ruled by despots. Regardless of whether the constitution of the Israeli government or the manner in which the Israeli government rules finds approval or not; as long as anti-Semitism is an urgent problem, Israel remains the saving anchor, a type of insurance policy for hassled Jews in Europe and elsewhere.

**You are well acquainted with pedagogical literature. How is the State of Israel pictured in German schoolbooks?**

The curricula in many federal states don’t focus on Israel and its society, but rather on Israel as a part of the Middle East conflict. The school books are developed in accordance with this, so the school children get to know Israel almost only as a land in crisis that leads wars. Another problem is posed by certain combinations of text and image, which arouse strong emotions and can reduce inhibitions to anti-Semitism. Often the educators themselves don’t notice what half-baked knowledge and prejudices they’re carrying around with them and what kind of contaminated inheritance they’re passing on to the next generation. To become aware of these circumstances with humility is the first step to improvement.

It certainly can’t simply be a matter of beautifying the difficult conglomerate of relations in the Middle East, or simply keeping the Israel-Palestine conflict out of the school books; at the same time, Israel is not a country that should be reduced to catastrophic clichés. For that reason, in the future, one should paint a more complex and differentiated picture in the schoolbooks, the kind of picture that is often left out in the media that are seeking little more than clicks: Israel as a democratic state that provides both its Jewish and Arabic citizens with possibilities for freedom and democratic participation, despite external threats, and of the kind that are not offered anywhere else in the Middle East; Israel as a highly developed nation of culture, high class technology, and of start-ups, as well as Israel as a multicultural national with unique relations to Germany.

(Interview: Olaf Glöckner)