



Letters to David

01.12.2011 | Friedrich Goelz

In 2003 the theologian and pastor Friedrich Gölz begins to write letters to his grandson David. The letters tell of a long journey, the journey of a Christian to the roots of his faith: Judaism.

At the end there were 22 very personal letters, in-depth reflections on "the ever-stressed relationship between Judaism and Christianity," letters in which he not only tries to give his grandson an understanding of many different aspects of Judaism, but also represents a careful, sometimes tentative, sometimes, in the best sense of the word, 'radical' self-assurance of his own Christian existence in the face of Auschwitz. In a gentle, yet insisting tone, he tells of Jewish and Christian personalities he met on his journey who decisively helped to shape his thinking. In an elucidating way, he explains to his grandson the various movements within Judaism, reflects on the sinister history of church and theology in relationship to Jews and Judaism and keeps coming back to speak about the Middle East conflict.

One of the reviews about the character of the resulting book puts it appropriately:

"These are not distant theological or historical treatises. The reader finds him/herself, instead, caught up in the thinking, even the struggle, of a sensitive theologian, pastor and contemporary person, deeply worried about key issues. The personal involvement, the biographical anchoring, the partaking in the development of his thinking and feeling, make these letters so readable, challenging the reader to reconsider his/her much loved positions."

Below we present four of the 22 "Letters to David," which provide an exemplary sense of the style and content of the book. If they have you inspired to read the remaining 18 letters, you can download the entire book as pdf file. Due to a "Creative Commons License," issued by the Klingenstein-Verlag that published the "Letters to David" as a book in 2008, it is available as pdf file for non-commercial use. The link to the full version (in German) can be found at the bottom of this page.

Christoph Münz, jcrelations.net

These are genuine letters from a grandfather to his grandson that I am presenting here. I wrote them between November 2003 and April 2005. Through them I also wanted to clarify in my own mind the changes that I feel I made in my thinking over many years.

The timing and content of the letters were often random. The context became clear to me sometimes only later. I will, therefore, forego any thorough, smoothing revision. For it is not a position I wanted to describe, rather than a journey I wanted to narrate, on which David, then still a high school student, was willing to accompany me to some extent.

So I hope to find as readers not only younger people, but also people of my own age, parents and grandparents, for example, who are looking for a clarification of the ever-stressed relationship between Judaism and Christianity and of the issues raised here – even of Israel's role in the "Middle East conflict" – and who don't yet have ready answers.

The so-called Jewish-Christian dialogue should not exhaust itself in restrained exchanges of pleasantries. It should also not remain limited to the circle of a few specialists.

Relatives, who for so long and so thoroughly have become alien to each other, will only be able to come closer if they keep themselves free from an open or hidden interest in the "preservation of vested rights." We should be willing to reconsider an established, one-sided view of history, also to correct our own positions and cherished habits (may they be of the linguistic, political or dogmatic kind).

Therefore, I dream of a Christianity that considers its origin more thoroughly, recognizes its negligence and gets ready, here and there, to break out of what has become habitual and all too familiar. Only then will Christianity be able to discover its Jewish mother anew and in love.

Frieder Götz

in April 2008

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First Letter

A grandfather asks his grandson for help

Stuttgart, November 25, 2003

Dear David,

Some time ago I told you that for some years I have concerned myself with the history of German

Jews. You looked at me quite surprised. You were apparently of the opinion that other, more interesting and timely topics might be worthwhile for a grandfather to study. That I will not argue. But since I am still hanging on to this topic that surely appears rather strange to you, I would like to tell you in a few letters of my old-age studies. At the same time I have a hope that these letters might also arouse your interest in my topic.

Now you'll ask: Why just "Letters to David?" I have met another, a Jewish David, to whom I want to introduce you. You might have seen his picture the other day in the Jewish Museum in Berlin:

He lived in Berlin at the turn of the 18th to the 19th Century and was known among Jews and Christians as a progressive man. His teacher and role model had been Moses Mendelssohn, who was famous for his wisdom. After the death of his master, this David Friedländer set out to continue and to complete his master's work of reform. As one would hang a picture on a nail, so I will hang what I am going to tell you on the "Open Letter" that this David wrote 205 years ago, and that in its time caused some excitement among Jews and Christians. For my subject really reaches back far beyond the turns of the last two centuries. It goes back to antiquity and has an effect even in our time.?

Whatever I have read and considered about this other David and about the long history, in which he played a certain key role, I want to frame in these "Letters to David." For a reader and listener I had wished for someone I know and like -- and who would perhaps even respond to these letters, and by asking questions, help me to reach further clarifications. So I ask you, dear grandson, would you want to get involved? Would you kindly receive these letters, read through them and store them? The latter in the event that either you yourself or another reader will be infected by my interest in the fate of German Jews.

Why exactly did you occur to me as a possible recipient? First, because among our grandchildren you have always been the most enthusiastic reader. A second reason: When you were born in April 1987, I shared the joyous event with a female Jewish friend who lives in Israel. And she wrote back, obviously startled,

Dear Frieder, how can you ever be so imprudent as to give your grandchildren Jewish names!"

Do you understand why my friend Trude K. worried about your first name? She feared that for a Christian a "Jewish" name could be disadvantageous in today's Germany. 200 years ago the David of Berlin wanted to make such fears impossible in the future and for all time. That, and why it would not work for him, will also have to be reported.

Because this other David has meanwhile also come close to my heart, my "First Letter to David" will now come to you. I hope it will make you a little curious. I'm sending you my warm regards.

Your grandfather

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Second letter

Why Trude K. got upset about the name David

Stuttgart, December 4, 2003

Dear David,

You asked why my Israeli friend actually got upset about the fact that my grandchildren were given "Jewish names." Certainly not because Jews want to keep their names for themselves. They know that we Christians have the Jewish Bible, the so-called "Old Testament," in common with them. More correctly, as non-Jews we have received the Bible, a thoroughly Jewish book, from the Jews. Even the "New Testament" was in all its parts written by Jews. But Trude K., who is a bit older than I, just barely escaped Germany when she was about as old as you are now. All her relatives were murdered. If you know the novel "Exodus", or the movie, you can imagine what Trude has lived and suffered through in her youth.

She had grown up as the daughter of a devout Jewish family in Meiningen (Thuringia). As a child and as a young girl she had felt entirely a German. She was a very good student and wanted to become a teacher.

But then, during her years in school, a storm came, which branded all Jews living in Germany as hated strangers. This poisoning of the climate with Hitler in 1933 did not come over Germany like a sudden thunder storm out of the blue. It was the horrible result of a long social development in our country.

You know what happened in Germany during the night of the 9th to the 10th of November 1938; the "Kristallnacht." By that time Trude was living as a young teacher in Duisburg. She was only permitted to teach in a Jewish school. But during that night the school was burnt down along with the adjacent synagogue. After that, still in November, teachers were able to bring some of their Jewish students across the border into Holland. From there, Dutch helpers brought children, whose parents were often already in concentration camps, to safety in England. Trude came with other children to a collection point in Hamburg, where she helped prepare 14 to 17-year-old Jewish children for their expected emigration to Palestine. Just before the war these children had to literally be bought from the Nazi state.

In 1940 Trude went as minder and counselor on an old totally overcrowded ship with about 1000 children and young people on board, from Vienna down the Danube, passing Turkey, to Palestine. This long journey of anxiety and cramped conditions was, she says, horrifying. When they finally arrived off the coast of Palestine, the responsible British mandate government did not want to let more Jews into the country for fear of unrest. Ironically, the ship's name was "Patria," in German "fatherland." All these boys and girls crammed together on the Patria had escaped from the country they had always considered their home country. There they had been persecuted and threatened by death. Now they were also denied access to the country of their ancestors. For days the Patria, with all the young Jews who had escaped from Germany, was lying anchored in the great bay near the city of Haifa. It was said that the Jewish refugees would have to return to Germany, or perhaps they would temporarily be deported to Madagascar. Panic broke out and the

sailors decided to sink the ship in the harbor, to make an onward or even return trip impossible. 260 young people drowned after the explosion, for which the sailors had used the wrong amount of explosives. The others, including Trude, saved themselves by swimming ashore.

After years of great uncertainty and fear, Trude began to feel a little safer in Palestine, she says. But not for long, because the Jewish immigrants, whose number increased, were not welcome there. Security was out of the question – and still is up to this day ...

After the war and after the founding of the Jewish State (1948) Trude and her husband occasionally came back to Germany. Herbert K. had suffered a similar experience to her's; his relatives had been murdered in concentration camps. That this family K. has German friends again, is anything but natural. You can surely imagine that such Jews felt a deep resentment against Germans and everything German after the years of fear and flight, and through the memory of their murdered relatives. Trude still harbors a kind of mistrust, rather a basic sense of the difference between Jews and Christians, because of the age-old enmity, which, she fears, could be mobilized in Germany once more and at any time. Besides, throughout her life she bemoans the fact that her parents did not flee immediately after Hitler came to power. During the first years of the "Third Reich" that would still have been possible by leaving behind all their belongings. But as they were respected Jewish citizens, they had been quite sure that in spite of Hitler's "seizure of power," the worst they would have to endure would be a few temporary antisemitic Nazi riot, but nothing life-threatening. So thoroughly had many Jews underestimated the hailed "new Germany" and the hatred of Jews that would soon be stirred into an all-consuming fire!

From these experiences stems Trude's suspicion that it could never be good to bear a Jewish name in Germany. And when I had told her enthusiastically that my newborn grandson's name is David, this emotional affect ("How can you give him a Jewish name!") came up again. When your sister Miriam was born, she said nothing of the sort, I'm glad to say.

Besides, life stories such as Trude's can explain why many Israelis of this older generation can sometimes be quite stubborn and a little difficult to deal with. Here in Germany the policies of the State of Israel are often quickly and harshly condemned. Many like to grumble about "these impossible Israelis," who sometimes respond to Arab hostility quite harshly. However, anyone who has just a little understanding for the disappointments and injuries, the bad memories with which many Jews have to live there, will be more cautious in their verdict on Israel's policies.

What does all this have to do with that other David, whose name was Friedländer? I want to tell you about him and his historical context in the following letters. In fact, even in his time the developments were set up which later, during my youth, reached its dismal low point and ended for countless Jews in utter disaster.

Whoever wants to see and understand why the poison of antisemitism has spread so wide and eaten itself into the hearts of most Germans during the 19th Century, must reach out far beyond David Friedländer's life, forward and backward. We might, for example and in passing, recall yet two other Davids: Both established a Jewish state, in a distance of nearly three thousand years from each other. Since we are now soon drawing closer to Christmas time, when all the beautiful songs are sung, I remind you also that the Jew, whose birth Christians celebrate on Christmas Day, has often been called the "Son of David."

You see, the terrain on which I would like to move back and forth in your company is quite spacious. For these long travels it takes patience and good breath. Both I wish both of us.

Warm regards from your grandfather

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Twelfth Letter

About the beautiful city of Haifa at Mount Carmel

Stuttgart, August 1, 2004

Dear David,

The map of Israel/Palestine, we have seen quite often in the media. Do you know where on this map to look for the City of Haifa? Where the coastline in a kind of mountain nose juts into the Mediterranean, we find the port and large bay with this perhaps most beautifully situated city in the country. Like a big arena, Haifa spreads in a semicircle, open toward the sea. It appears most glorious to the visitors from the top, where the Carmel mountain range has that "nose." I have stood up there with many groups of visitors, looking down, marveling.

Let me tell you what occurs to me when I think of this beautiful city: Werner Neufliess, of whom I told you in the letter before the last one, died in Haifa. After his massive stroke they still brought him to a local nursing home. Thus it had been possible for his daughter, who lives in Haifa, to accompany him on the last stretch of his life.

In the bay of Haifa was also the ship that had come to the country with Trude. Do you remember? It had to be sunk, because at that time the British did not want to let Jews into the country, not even those who had barely escaped the deadly threat. Trude now lives in a suburb of Haifa in a nursing home. Incidentally, she sends you her regards!

In the upper town of Haifa is the Bahá'í garden and Temple. Did you hear about this religion (some would say "cult") which wants to unite in itself all the best of Islam, Christianity and Judaism? Anyway, a particularly peaceful climate seems to prevail in Haifa. Again and again I read and heard that there's almost no tension between different ethnic groups. Arab Muslims and Jews, and Christians all live amicably together. I hope that even today this is and continues to be the case.

Up on the mountain slope, i.e in the "better quarter" of the Upper City still another David was at home who was important for me. Following the second world war, he was an excellent Israeli tour guide for countless Swabian visitors. He had often been tortured and humiliated by Germans in a concentration camp, and now, after the war, he was traveling with German groups through the land of Israel, making even many of them his good friends. That was something that amazed himself even more than others. I enjoyed the most wonderful hospitality with David Eres and his wife Zipporah during the Gulf War (1991). He was one of the Israeli friends with whom I – in spite of our

heartfelt friendship – could not agree politically. Perhaps the story will still have to be told.

I could also tell you about the "Knights Templar." They were Swabian compatriots, Christians, who in the second half of the 19th Century emigrated to "Palestine," to await there the coming of the kingdom of God, of which Jesus had spoken, and to realize their vision of a renewed society.

The mountain nose, under which the wonderfully wide Haifa bay spreads toward the sea, is the end of the Carmel mountain range. This small mountain range may be known to you through your religious instruction. The Bible tells us that the prophet Elijah had gathered the people of Israel on Mount Carmel during a very critical time, where he would cause God to pass a sentence. What the priests of the Canaanite god Baal could not do, happened through Elijah's prayer. Fire came down from heaven, consumed the sacrifice, and convinced the Israelites anew of the truth of their father's faith. The conclusion of this biblical story (I Kings chapter 18) is pretty gruesome: It tells us that Elijah as punishment killed 400 priests of the false god Baal. You can imagine that some of my peace-minded fellow Christians take strong offense to such biblical stories.

On this Carmel mountain range, high above the beautiful city which, of course, did not yet exist at the time of the Prophet Elijah in the ninth century B.C.E., is now located the monastery of the great Catholic monastic order of the "Carmelites." And now I would like to tell you about someone who has lived there as a monk until a few years ago. I regret to have met him personally only briefly, because I think he's probably been one of the most interesting people who, after the Second World War, were looking for a new home and found it in the Jewish state.

This is, in brief, his gripping biography: Oswald Rufeisen was born in 1922 in Poland, not far from Auschwitz, as the son of Jewish parents. He went to school there and graduated from high school. As a teenager he had already joined a Zionist youth group.

With seventeen years of age he witnessed the arrival of German troops in Poland. He flees with his parents. When the parents can no longer continue to run, they ask their two sons to carry on. The brothers will never see their parents again. After an adventurous flight they reach Vilnius. Many Jews who had escaped from Eastern Europe gathered there. The younger brother Rufeisen can get one of the coveted spots in a youth transport to Palestine. Oswald struggles through with great effort and skill; his life is continually endangered. Meanwhile, the German-Russian war has broken out. As in a hunt, Jews are chased between and behind the fronts. He is captured and he escapes, surviving raids and mistreatments, working for a while as a shoemaker for the Gestapo. There he hears about upcoming mass shootings.

He hides on a Lithuanian farm. When he gets a warning there, he decides to get rid of the yellow star, which he had to wear as a Jew, and to flee to Belarus to live there as a Pole. Because he speaks fluent German, Polish and Russian, the Germans employ him as interpreter.

"During this night," he wrote later, "I decided to go along but do everything I can to save Jews and non-Jews, everyone whom I could help. I was 19 years old. Now I felt like a human being again. Before I was a hunted animal, but now, when I saw the opportunity to help my people, I found my dignity again as a human being."

Soon he becomes an almost indispensable secretary to a German commander. He was given a black police uniform to wear, and in the town of Mir (west of Minsk), he is seen as a member of the occupation force, the Gestapo, the Secret State Police. He witnesses terrible things and can prevent some by warning the victims, eventually even smuggling weapons into the Ghetto. Then he accidentally discovers the decision by the Germans to "liquidate" the Ghetto. He warns the Jews there. In order to give them more time to escape, he persuades the German soldiers by a trick to go hunting for wild geese. Thus, a few hundred young Jews are able to escape from the ghetto into the woods. However, because he is betrayed, Rufeisen has to flee also, and he hides in

a convent of nuns. When the Germans later clear this monastery, he escapes, disguised as a nun. In his hiding place he had read the New Testament, and the figure of Jesus, the Jew, becomes for him the leading figure of his life. At this time he decides to be baptized. For a short time he finds shelter and work, then he has to flee again back into the woods, where he joins a group of partisans. Only when the Red Army drives the German troops back, he surfaces again.

After the war, Oswald Rufeisen is a witness in trials against collaborators. Because he is a man who always does completely and consequently what he thinks is right, he goes back to Poland and studies Catholic theology and becomes a priest. At his baptism he adopts 'Daniel' as his first name. Why? Because the Bible tells the story of the prophet Daniel, who is protected by angels in the lions' den. He sees it as wonderful preservation that he had been able to survive all the horror. And now he wonders for what purpose he has survived ...

In the nineteen-fifties, he travels to Israel to meet his brother and old Zionist friends, even survivors from Mir. He had never forgotten that he was a Jew, and certainly wanted to remain a Jew as a baptized Christian. Israel is his new home; already as a Zionist youth he had chosen this country as his destination. He joins the Carmelite monastery as a monk, high above the city of Haifa. Soon he becomes a "case" that is about to engage the Israeli authorities and public for years.

Even at its inception, the State of Israel had given itself a law by which every Jew who wants to immigrate to Israel, would automatically be recognized as citizen of the State. Because the Jewish State had been created after the Second World War in order to ensure that every Jew, wherever he or she comes from, should find the right of domicile here. Oswald, respectively Daniel Rufeisen, the immigrant, appeals to this legal entitlement. However, the ministry of the Interior refuses to give him the right of domicile on the grounds that he is no longer a Jew. Here, the Ministry first builds on the old Jewish regulation of affiliation: a Jew is any person born of a Jewish mother. Correct: one normally becomes a Jew by birth. Rufeisen had relied on this fact. But the Israeli authorities also judge according to another, newer rule, that a Jew who is baptized and thus converted to Christianity, has lost this automatic right of immigration to the Jewish state. Ultimately, the Israeli Supreme Court based its majority decision on this rule when it decided that Rufeisen would be allowed to live in Israel and, on grounds of his merits, one would be willing to give him citizenship through naturalization. However, he could not really be recognized as a Jew, because he had separated himself from Judaism by his baptism.

I know, dear David, that in your ears all this sounds odd, if not even a bit crazy. But behind this restrictive rule that denies baptized Jews their full Jewishness, stirs the ancient, deep hurt of a people, always being despised and humiliated, often cruelly and deadly persecuted by baptized Christians. Although baptism is originally a Jewish ritual, the Jews regard a Jewish person who is baptized as a Christian as one who wants to separate from Judaism, and is therefore considered an "apostate." Although a Jew may believe whatever he wants: in a god or even in nothing at all, his attitude, his behavior changes nothing in his belonging to the Jewish people by reason of his birth. Even a Jewish atheist -- and that is not even rare! -- is never denied his Jewishness. By the way: whoever converts to Judaism is also a Jew, whatever he may have been or believed before. Through the completed conversion he fully belongs to the Jewish people. But when a Jew is baptized as a Christian, he can no longer be a Jew.

The brave man who lived in the monastery of the Carmelites could accept this verdict only under protest. He had to put up with being regarded as a tolerated stranger, and not as a Jewish returnee to receive his Israeli citizenship, not as his right, but because of his merits. Rufeisen had never tried to convert other Jews to Christianity or to talk them into accepting baptism. He said, "Jews do not need to be evangelized." They belong to the people of God. So the baptism of Rufeisen was not at all (as in our church) "necessary for salvation." But this monk was defiant in his insistence to be and to remain a baptized Jew, even as a Catholic priest. He gathered people who had a similar life history and who, like himself, stood up against the strict separation of Jews and Christians. The

result was that in Haifa as well as in other places, a small Hebrew-speaking community emerged; Jews who were and are convinced that their commitment to Jesus does not separate them from their people. Father Daniel devoted himself to this "Hebrew Christian community" until his death. He never got tired, stressing that all the followers of Jesus were Jews, and that also the first Christian community belonged unmitigated to Judaism, which at that time was also very diverse. Even during a long conversation with the Polish pope, Rufeisen decidedly held to this opinion.

Father Daniel reminded us that the eventually powerful and Greek-speaking church had only in the fourth Century C.E. radically separated itself from the original Hebrew Christianity, in order to henceforth call itself catholic, and to relate more to Rome than to Jerusalem. But since "catholic" means "general," "universal," only a community comprised of non-Jews and Jews should really call itself "catholic," a community which invokes the Jewish Jesus and believes in the God of the Bible. All the major churches, which now call themselves "Catholic" or "Evangelical/Protestant" or "Orthodox" have, to their detriment, lost something essential on their way through history: namely, the connection and communion with the Jews, and also the connection to the Jewish roots of Christianity. Unfortunately for the churches, they had exchanged a Christianity that no longer asks, (in the Jewish way), what shall we do? What is God's will for us and for his world? But rather, (in the Greek way), what does one need to know about God? What is the true teaching, the doctrine? Father Daniel never got tired of pointing out the unfortunate separation of Christianity from its Jewish context.

Let us consider briefly how close our David Friedländer and Daniel Rufeisen are to each other -- but how much they also differ from each other.

In 1799 Friedländer had asked whether he could be accepted into the church as a Jew, without having to adopt the dogmas of the Church. He sought an agreement with Provost Teller only on the basis of a reduced belief -- agreed on by both parties -- that the Jews should give up their strange, regulated way of life demanded by their law, and progressive Christians could also, for the sake of the community, put aside outdated statements of belief that have become incomprehensible anyway. Thus one could agree upon the main denominator of a perhaps somewhat diluted religiosity, namely upon the somewhat nebulous common conviction of the Enlightenment: that there is "a God," that human beings have a moral duty, and that death is not the absolute end. Friedländer had asked, whether a somewhat less committed religion, a Jewish confession or denomination could conceivably exist in the no-man's-land between Judaism and Christianity as a third religion under the wide umbrella of the church, a church now consisting of the Catholic and Protestant religions, privileged by State and society. Did Friedländer really want this? I doubt it, as I wrote to you recently. But he wanted to hear in public, if that, maybe, was the price which the Jews would have to pay to gain recognition and security that had been denied them for so long.

Rufeisen, it seems to me, wanted much more: he wanted both completely. He tried for himself and with those who were traveling with him to hold together what originally belonged together and was separated to our detriment -- perhaps even to our mutual detriment. He wanted to be completely Jewish and no less completely Christian and find out whatever would arise from this combination. Perhaps something would grow in the nature of early Christianity? After such a long estrangement between Christians and Jews, it may be that Christianity and Judaism can only find each other again in such loners as Rufeisen or in small groups like that in Haifa --. Anyone who understands the plight of Christianity and that of Judaism should actually be thankful for such loners and such small groups. They point to a path that is currently barely passable. Maybe it will become passable, when both sides fully realize, in what kind of mess they both are stuck. Each in its own way.

And one last thing: Between Friedländer's letter and Rufeisen's life-experiment lies the great catastrophe of European Jewry, which had nearly swallowed the life of young Oswald Rufeisen, and not only once. Countless lives were devoured. No! Not only devoured, they were murdered by

Germans, most of whom were baptized. You see, David: The story of the alienation between Christians and Jews can be comfortably studied from the distance of an onlooker. But it can also disturb and alarm someone who is a German and wants to be a Christian. And I try in my letters to let you and a few other friends know about my disturbance and my horror at what happened, what was neglected and what in its scope and in its consequences is still not fully recognized. On this day, six years ago, Father Daniel was buried in Haifa.

Thank you, dear David, that you still listen to me. Warm regards into your holidays!

Your grandfather

PS: Because I also mentioned the prophet Elijah at the beginning of this letter and under the topic Haifa and Mount Carmel -- and because many brave Christians know only the bad end of the old and bloody story in I Kings 18, -- and because some of my colleagues, outraged at the cruelty of the "Old Testament" man of God, and at times (with a side glance at Israeli politicians of our time) audaciously insinuate that this slaughter of the priests of Baal was typical (or even a model?) for the hardness and intolerance of the Jewish religion -- that's why I want to note that, first, the Bible does not state that God had advised or ordered Elijah to "slaughter" 400 idolatrous priests. Has Elijah perhaps gone overboard in his zeal? If so, then this frenzy (see the continuation in 1 Kings 19!) caused him to be in a bad way afterwards. Secondly, it was not uncommon in ancient times that the personnel of a cult of a clearly defeated deity had to pay for such a defeat with their lives.

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Seventeenth Letter

About the three lives of Gotthold S.

Or, is love blind?

Stuttgart, November 25, 2004

Dear David,

The man of whom I am telling you today is not a Jew. But he's no longer a Christian either. He left his church disappointed many years ago. And now he has often wondered whether he should not dare to complete the step onto the other, the Jewish side. But his friends, I included, have strongly dissuaded him:

"If you can, then please just stay where you are. That is, between the shores. For just by standing

in between, you could be a useful signal for both sides."

And indeed, there are now Christians and Jews who remain connected to this man and his wife in gratitude. The two are a kind of bridge, comparable to Father Daniel Rufeisen, of whom I was telling you in my twelfth letter.

Gotthold was born almost 80 years ago in a small place on the edge of the Swabian Alb. There he grew up as the son of an able master carpenter. When Hitler came to power, and when his "taking power" began to work its way into the smallest village, Gotthold had just started school. He reports that among his teachers were active National Socialists who praised Hitler's "Third Reich" at every opportunity and stirred up hatred against the "Jewish enemies of our people." So many Germans at the time had allowed themselves to be dazzled by the "successes" of the Nazis, not seeing their dubious ulterior motives. The terrible unemployment of the twenties was melting away and soon gave way to full employment, which certainly did not serve peace, but served the preparation for war. Also, the business of Gotthold's father began to flourish. The son was, like the other boys, organized in the "Hitler Youth." There were no Jews in his village. However, he sung antisemitic songs that glorified violence and repeated the slogans of those years, as did all of us boys. "Sadly, only a few people looked behind the scenes -- far too few," he writes. Only his mother did not trust the new state. She spoke contemptuously about the highly-praised "Führer," so that her relatives were often afraid that she would be denounced and therefore locked up (you know, it were often the mothers who saw through the deception of the Nazis more quickly than their husbands and children).

Gotthold was an avid glider pilot. But already at the age of sixteen he had to look after the family business, representing his father, who had been drafted into the army early. Eventually he himself was drafted into the Air Force in the middle of the war. All in all it was quite a "normal" childhood and youth he had experienced, considering the times of war. Also, his experience was like that of so many other soldiers, having had to join in the senseless and casualty-costly defensive struggles of the last months of the war, only to fall into Russian captivity. There were beatings, when the prisoners of war were herded through the streets of a Czech town. It was even worse to endure the hunger. Finally, he was forced into cattle cars with many others for transportation into Russia. And here, on this miserable journey, came the day that was to change Gotthold's life and thought thoroughly and forever. I quote from a report he later wrote:

"The train stopped again. Maybe it was an opportunity to receive a starvation diet? But suddenly the door flew open, shouting was heard, "Everybody out!" We found ourselves on the site of the former Auschwitz concentration camp! Would our journey end here? The healing shock I suffered then, haunts me to this day, ended an illusory world in which I had lived. The Russians helped us with vigor in the following days, when we prisoners had to learn the horrendous story of this place. My own miserable physical condition, my own powerlessness increased my terror. I felt like walking on a journey through hell. Had here been beasts in human form to commit this murder? No! Ordinary Germans had committed mass murder in these camps for years. Horror and terror pursued me and did not let go of me. Images were burnt deep into my soul. In those days I swore to myself: three things I wanted to find out if life (with very little hope!) would give me one more chance.

- 1) Who is this "the Jew" really? Why was and is he so persecuted?
- 2) What determined the perpetrators? What caused them to become murderers?
- 3) What can I do against this deadly poison that has made our people sick?

As a twenty-year old prisoner of war, Gotthold had to work for months in the coal mines of the Donets region. It was his luck that he could do privileged work as a carpenter. He owed the saving of his half-starved life, which at that time was hanging by a thread, to a Russian-Jewish camp doctor who took the boy to the hospital barracks and eventually gave him a place in the first repatriation of sick prisoners of war. "To her I owe my survival!" This life-saver was probably the first Jewish person he got to see face to face.

Then began the second life of this Gotthold S., later to be followed by a third one. Dear David, you can imagine that there were others coming back from the war, who, like he had done in times of greatest need, had sworn to themselves this and that and had best intentions for the future. In the efforts of the postwar period such good intentions were all too often forgotten. This repatriate, however, could not forget the three questions he had brought home from Auschwitz. On the contrary, they pursued and occupied him so much that he got more and more on the nerves of those around him. At first, he had become an active member of his Protestant church congregation again, and he eagerly did service as a volunteer helper in Sunday school and then as member of the parish council.

Although he tried again and again to get answers to his three questions, no one in his church could give him an answer that was not very vague and unsatisfactory. On the contrary, he gradually realized that the Christian church was itself part of the bitter answer: Did not Christianity persecute the Jews -- and that long before there were Nazis? Were the motives of anti-Judaism not originally and again and again of a "religious" nature? And when he finally asked what he would have to change in his own beliefs, what he could do to overcome the evidently deep-rooted and ancient hostility against Jews in Germany, he got from his church and by their pastors usually only very general information that did not satisfy him at all.

Even the study of the Bible could not answer his doubting questions. On the contrary, in the New Testament he found much of what seemed to have always stirred up the popular antipathy to the Jews in the Christian West: the Jews were the enemies, even the murderers of Jesus Christ. He read about the Jewish people who stubbornly refused baptism and faith in Jesus Christ. For this Jewish refusal even the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans was considered a deserved punishment. And, as was generally known, the Christian church had replaced the ancient Jewish people of God. What in the Old Testament was still hope, had been fulfilled in the New Testament ... Yet, all these tried and true answers could not calm Gotthold S. anymore.

I can well imagine that Gotthold's restless questions got more and more on the nerves of friends from the congregation and the YMCA: "You always with your Jews," said his friends, "Don't you know any other topics?" Wasn't it enough that the German churches soon after the war had confessed their complicity in the injustice of the Third Reich and that they had apologized? One should, finally, let the past be gone. And now, no one speaks against the Jews anyway, especially since there are hardly any Jews left in Germany ...

When Gotthold did not yield, but stubbornly kept asking for the roots of antisemitism, he had to hear, "Oh well, just go to your Jews and let us alone!" He followed this last piece of advice between 1960 and 1980 by traveling to Israel almost once every year or even several times, loaded with relief supplies. This was difficult for him, because in those economic boom years his company, now a well known and flourishing kitchen furniture factory, the company needed him very much at home. But he said, "When others were vacationing, I flew to Israel, to 'my Jews,' who needed help. I became aware that as a Christian and as a German I am and will remain a life-long debtor to Israel." He wanted to make this clear to himself not only theoretically, but to prove it by action. Finally, he left the church, not light-heartedly, but in deep disappointment. Yet, in Swabia he found some people who thought like he did. Besides his wife he had friends who, like him, wanted to give

visual signals and to be themselves signs of a real change in Christian attitudes toward Jews and their new, vulnerable State of Israel. Meanwhile, Erna and Gotthold S. have lived in Jerusalem already for 20 years. At home this was hardly understood. However, Gotthold had begun his third life, in which he and his wife really had only one thing in mind: They wanted to assist and comfort those Jews in Israel, who had suffered through us Germans.

Now I must tell you how I got to know those two people. This would in fact become an unforgettable experience of war for me. Most people here in Germany do not even remember that brief Gulf War (1991), in which a multinational force expelled Iraqi forces from Kuwait, which had been annexed unlawfully. A final ultimatum by the UN had not been taken seriously by the Iraqi president. So he threatened several times that if Iraq would be attacked, he might shoot Scud missiles into the hated Jewish state. Because he had already bombed the Iraqi Kurds with rockets of poison gas and killed them by the thousands, Israel expected the possibility of just such a deadly attack on the Jewish state, so hated by all the Arab states. Although Israel had been kept out of that conflict, it was and is to all Arabs a protege of the United States. So the threat of Saddam Hussein was to be taken quite seriously ...

When, in January 1991, residing foreigners in Israel, not only tourists but also, for example, the German volunteers of "Action Reconciliation Service for Peace," were urged to leave the threatened country as quickly as possible, I decided to fly to Israel for at least a week. I could imagine how the Israelis would feel after all their friends had deserted them. Unlike on previous flights to Israel, this time there were no tourists beside me on the plane, almost only young Israelis who returned from Europe to their threatened homes "just in case." No one understood what I wanted there now as a foreigner, when all other non-Jews had fled the country. After landing, I was therefore questioned by the police as accurately and for longer than ever before, until finally a telephoned Israeli friend came to vouch for me and "liberate" me.

Then began a very special trip with no sightseeing and no archeology. The people in the streets of Israel seemed not to be as vivid and lively, as I was accustomed to on previous trips. Instead, they seemed determined to show a peculiar peaceful defiance. Tourism had collapsed, and the hotels were empty. One expected the worst, and the Israelis said that they felt alone again, deserted by all their friends. Gas masks were distributed and the population was asked to seal the windows and doors of their homes with duct tape. In the news programs on television, we saw how Palestinians -- regardless of the risks to themselves -- danced for joy, because the Jews would finally be "gassed" by Iraqi missiles. You can imagine how such announcements affected the Israelis, for that terrible word has a horrible meaning for them. There was no panic, but a mixture of deep bitterness and defiance. When, in the four decades since the founding of the State, had the Jews not felt threatened and instead felt really safe? Was Theodor Herzl's dream of a state that would finally give the persecuted people a safe home, after all only a dream?

On my tour, which led me in the first few days to visit friends in the north, they advised me to go to Jerusalem, not to an (empty) hotel, but to the S. family. The family received me, the stranger, very warmly. Here with Erna and Gotthold I experienced the first nightly rocket alarms. The radio announcer demanded that we put on our gas masks. As it turned out, I didn't have one. But on the next morning good Erna asked the soldiers, who happened to be stationed near the house, for help. One of them said he had a "private gas mask" at home, which he could lend the German visitor for his stay in Jerusalem. So was I equipped "just in case."

During the day, given the tense situation, only short walks were possible. On those walks and during the three evenings of my stay, my hosts told their story. I realized that the two had only one desire and intent for the rest of their lives: They wanted to do what my own father had not had the courage to do on that 10th of November 1938. As German non-Jews they wanted throughout and consistently stand close to endangered Jews. And not only during those really threatening days of war, but with all the energy and time that God would still give them. Gotthold, the furniture

manufacturer, has set up shop in a large home for elderly and disabled people in Jerusalem, a workshop in which he, for twenty years, has worked every day for hours (and at his own expense!) on carpentry and repairs. This is his "third life," he says. And his Erna pays visits to single women who have survived the horrors of concentration camps and who still suffer the consequences through multiple mental and physical problems. On a Sabbath eve I met one of her charges. She had suffered the indescribable from German doctors and slave-drivers in various camps...

I learned back then that there are more of such strange Germans in Israel, who have made this the content of their lives. The love for the Jewish people has probably made some of them a little blind. They are now so excited about all things Jewish and Israel that they, for example, do not perceive anymore what in this state, unfortunately, does not work the way its founders had wanted.

You know, in some Christian "friends of the Jews" the love of Israel is combined with a lack of understanding for the other side of the conflict, sometimes even with a certain contempt for the Palestinians. There are fundamentalist-minded Christians, mostly in America, who are of an anti-Islamic mould, who think it would be best if the Jews were to blow up the two Islamic mosques on the Temple Mount in Jerusalem and replace them with a new Jewish temple. But they want this only because they think, due to a (misunderstood) passage in the book of Romans, that in the end Jesus will come back and all Jews will convert to our (!) Savior. Surely you've heard of or read about such Israelis who believe, in contrast to the majority of the population that the Jewish state should not even give away one square inch of the conquered and occupied land. They also justify this claim with a literal, but quite unhistorical understanding of certain biblical passages. From this extreme group came the murderer of Yitzhak Rabin...

Gotthold does not belong to one of those religious agitators, who are present in Christianity as they are in Judaism and Islam, and about whom I may write you perhaps at a later time. Where Gotthold works as a carpenter, he also has good contacts with the Arabs employed there. And he knows their misery and frustration. He also knows about the internal danger for Israelis to become hard or even arrogant and contemptuous towards the Arabs after bitter experiences. "One is an occupying power not with impunity," said a thoughtful, self-critical Jewish teacher to us soon after the victory of 1967. He has therefore been involved in Israeli peace groups. And when I once pointed out to Gotthold S. the often oppressive "treatment" of Palestinians by young Israeli soldiers, he wrote back, "Yes, I know. My dear Israelis will have to learn a lot." So he can speak and write, because what he criticizes in Israeli policy does not come from a heat who knows-it-all or even a mocking heart, but from one who is sad. It is driven by a deep solidarity with the Jewish people. How different the sound of blanket condemnations of Israel, which you can hear in our country! Many people talk as if criticism should not only apply to a certain political course, but their talk is meant to denounce an entire state. And for that I have ever less understanding since that January in 1991.

Incidentally, during that time I went with Gotthold on a Friday evening to attend the synagogue service. Here I noticed how much respect he, a non-Jew, enjoys. He has his own place between the Jewish worshippers. By now he is also quite fluent in reciting the Hebrew Sabbath prayers. After the service he introduced me, to my surprise, to an older, very famous, Israeli historian, who had been sitting next to him. This gentleman took me aside and said, "You can hardly imagine how glad we are that there are such Germans and non-Jews as our Gotthold."

The next morning, early on the Sabbath, I took a taxi to the airport, very grateful for these encounters and for my new friendship with two admirable people, and there was an air alarm again. In a small room as a shelter, many people were crowded together, when two Iraqi missiles smashed somewhere nearby. All Jews had their gas masks on. Only one dog and I, the German, had none available. Although I was of course scared, somehow I also found the situation quite fitting, as it were.

One could, I wrote to you initially, compare this Swabian master carpenter and his good wife with Daniel Rufeisen, the Polish Carmelite monk. The difference: Father Daniel wanted to be both completely, a Jew (by birth) and a Christian (through his faith in Jesus). Gotthold and Erna S. are stuck in between, without a permanent spiritual home. They do not think that they have already reached their goal, but feel themselves more like a suspension bridge that connects two continents, without belonging to one or the other shore. I am very glad that there are such bridge-people.

Dear David, it is a pity that the two of us cannot soon travel together to Israel. Maybe you will get to do it later and visit all the places and people of whom I am telling you now. You could, for example, apply to the organization "Action Reconciliation Service for Peace" and ask for a place to do your civil service with them in Israel. I know of a former volunteer who could give you information about the organization.

Warm regards from your old grandfather

PS: I just noticed that only a year ago today, I had sent you the first of the "Letters to David." So we can celebrate a birthday!

THE COMPLETE GERMAN VERSION:

Friedrich Gölz:

[Letters to David](#)

Translation from the [German](#) by Fritz Voll with editing by his grandson Steven Foster.