When Erich Lüth, director of the state press office in Hamburg, traveled from Amsterdam to Tel Aviv on 8 April 1953, he was one of the first non-Jewish Germans to visit the State of Israel.¹ To hide his German identity, he had to use a couple of pseudonyms. His Israeli companions introduced him to Holocaust survivors in Israel as “Julius Bermann from Antwerp.”² Lüth’s journey was part of his ongoing personal quest for “peace with Israel,” for “reconciliation with the Jews” as a member of the German nation, which had committed the crime of murdering six million Jews, and others.

Together with fellow publicist Rudolf Küstermeier, who had survived eleven years in concentration camps as a socialist, Lüth started the “Friede mit Israel” (Peace with Israel) campaign in 1951, and called on fellow Germans to donate olive trees to the newly established Jewish state. At home, he was also known for his engagement in ridding the German cultural scene of lingering or resurgent Nazism and antisemitism.

But what could a single German possibly do after millions of deaths at German hands? Is reconciliation at all possible after the breach of absolute evil? What made Lüth think that his “peace” initiative and his incognito visit would have any chance of bridging the seemingly unbridgeable chasm separating the two peoples? Wasn’t that a quixotic quest at best or perhaps even betraying his own self-overestimation? For Lüth, whether German-Jewish reconciliation was possible or not was not a subject for philosophical speculation but an article of faith: he simply believed that he had found the “bridge” to the Jews already laid down by others. As he wrote in 1951,

It would be wrong to say that there had never been these Germans who struggle for an effective reparation (Wiedergutmachung), or there would never be again. Many thousands of socialists, democrats, and Christians died the same death that their Jewish brothers suffered in Hitler’s concentration camps, because of their resistance against the persecution of Jews. . . . They have built with their own bodies the first bridge of reconciliation (die erste Brücke der Versöhnung) between Germans and Jews, a bridge that spans the time before 1933 to the present. . . . Not Israel . . . not the individual Jew . . . can speak the first word. We are the ones who must begin. We must say: “We beg Israel for peace (Wir bitten Israel um Frieden)”\(^3\)

And so in his own mind, Lüth wasn’t just taking a plane to Lydda as a clandestine German tourist, but as a self-conscious member of

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3. Lüth is remembered for his public call to boycott the films of Veit Harlan, director of the notorious Nazi propaganda film \textit{Jud Süß} (1940), for which he was dragged into years of legal battle. See Peter Reichel, \textit{Vergangenheitsbewältigung in Deutschland: Die Auseinandersetzung mit der NS-Diktatur von 1945 bis heute} (Munich: C. H. Beck, 2001), 134–37.

4. Lüth, \textit{Friedensbitte}, 114. Lüth’s and Küstermeier’s petitions were publicized on 31 Aug. and 1 Sept. 1951 and documented in Lüth, \textit{Friedensbitte}, 112–18.
the German nation crossing the bridge of reconciliation, which had already been laid down by the German resisters. He later explained why he had accepted the invitation from the Israeli government to visit at a time when there were real, personal security concerns: “I considered a second step unavoidable after we had taken the first step.”

But, one must pause to ask, even if there were indeed such a “bridge,” or a remaining ridge in the sunken relational landscape, who would be there on the other side to meet him? Or to put it another way, if only the Germans or some Germans like Lüth believed in this “theory” of reconciliation, wouldn’t this be just another example of German wishful thinking, like the belief that successful Western integration or economic reconstruction means in effect “reconciliation” accomplished? Fortunately for Lüth, there were some from the other side of the relational gulf who crossed this bridge to meet him.

Lüth and Küstermeier’s initiative generated a considerable response within the Federal Republic, paving the way for Konrad Adenauer’s speech in the Bundestag on 27 September the same year, in which the German determination to make “moral and material reparation (Wiedergutmachung)” to Jewish individuals and Jewish communities was unequivocally expressed, which in turn paved the way for the Luxembourg Agreement between Israel and (West) Germany to be signed and ratified in 1952–53. More critical to the success or failure of Lüth’s endeavor, however, were of

5. Lüth, Friedensbitte, 51.
6. See supportive responses in Lüth, Friedensbitte, 118. Adenauer’s speech was recorded in “Die Erklärungen Bundeskanzler Dr. Adenauers und der Parteien zur Wiedergutmachung,” Freiburger Rundbrief 3/4, no. 12/15 (1951/1952): 9. Though this was not the first time that Adenauer expressed the intention of his administration to do Wiedergutmachung to Jewish victims, it was only after the 27 Sept. speech that concrete and substantial steps were taken to realize that intention, when Lüth’s initiative was an “exception” in the general apathy in civil society concerning the question of restitution. See Constantin Goschler, Wiedergutmachung: Westdeutschland und die Verfolgten des Nationalsozialismus 1945–1954 (Munich: R. Oldenbourg, 1992, 199–201; Goschler, Schuld und Schulden: Die Politik der Wiedergutmachung für NS-Verfolgte seit 1945 (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2005), 136.
course the Jewish responses, from which the presence or absence of the Jewish will to *restoration*—that is, the willingness on the Jewish side to take part in repairing the damaged German-Jewish relationship—could be gleaned. In this regard, it was not surprising that the early Jewish responses were mixed: some expressed doubt; others warmly welcomed the initiative of Lüth.\(^7\) The key point, though, is that it was neither rejected outright as a hopeless attempt, nor, what would be even worse, ignored altogether as irrelevant. An official letter from the Israeli government to Lüth dated 24 September 1951 served as a personal encouragement, stating with reservation that “if your call be taken up by the entire German people, **our ears will not be deaf,**” while holding the “possibility of reconciliation” open.\(^8\)

This willingness to “incline one’s ear” was accompanied by the willingness to “answer the other’s call.” Israel Gelber, a Jewish survivor of the Buchenwald concentration camp, wrote from Jerusalem in an open letter to Küstermeier and Lüth published on 18 October 1951: “I may not speak for Israel or for one of the millions who suffered, just as I may not remain silent for myself.”\(^9\) The former “Häftling” then went on to recount the many German helpers who had made his survival of seven years of imprisonment possible. He adopted approvingly Lüth’s idea of the German righteous as a “bridge of reconciliation”: “Such human beings alone could form a bridge between Jews and Germans. With my rescuers, I don’t find myself in a state of war.”\(^10\) Gelber called these righteous the “rescuers of the German human dignity” (*Retter der deutschen Menschenwürde*) and, without reservation, sent peace to Germany: “Ich schenke Deutschland den Frieden.”\(^11\)

Encouraging and magnanimous as it was as a personal statement of goodwill from a Jewish survivor, wouldn’t this response be “premature”—in the sense that at this point in the history of

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\(^7\) See, for example, “Ölzweig und Amalek,” in Lüth, *Friedensbitte*, 141.
\(^8\) Lüth, *Friedensbitte*, 22–23.
\(^10\) Ibid.
\(^11\) Ibid.
(West) Germany’s “policy of the past,” the process of denazification was hardly complete if not on reverse course, wouldn’t this “peace to Germany” be counterproductive? We will return to this question later when we explore the response of another Jewish survivor—Jean Améry.

More cautious Jewish voices indicated the directions that Lüth’s initiative should take if this “peace” were to attain a deeper significance than a mere interstate détente. For instance, Wolf Wester, a German Jew living in Israel, wrote an essay in Die Zeit advising Germans on the difference between international peace and reconciliation between peoples: “‘Reconciliation with the Jews’ (Aussöhnung mit den Juden) is an affair that concerns the entire Jewry (Judentum) directly and the State of Israel only indirectly; it is also an action of purely moral nature between the German and the Jewish peoples. ‘Peace with Israel’ by contrast means a state action (Staatsaktion) of a political and not least material character, which concerns the Federal Republic of Germany and the State of Israel directly, and the world Jewry only indirectly.” Wester was worried that interpeople reconciliation would be neglected by the sole consideration of interstate peace, and concluded that “only when the message comes from the Jews living in Germany to world Jewry that they experience true restitution and are treated by the Germans as equal citizens in value and in footing, can one hope that real reconciliation between both peoples develops.” This was not the first time that the crucial role of German Jews and other victims of Nazi persecution in the reconciliation between Germany and Israel and the world at large was emphasized, as we shall see in Eugen Kogon’s contribution below.

14. Ibid. Lüth apparently took this advice seriously and produced a second document under the “Peace with Israel” initiative with the title “Reconciliation with the Jews” (Versöhnung mit den Juden) in December 1951. Lüth, Friedensbitte, 152.
All in all, there was no objection whatsoever that postwar Germans could not use the “bridge” built by the German righteous to reach the destination of reconciliation with the surviving Jewish victims and their descendants. Rather, encouragement and advice on how Germans should use that infrastructure in a broader and deeper way were offered from the Jewish side. This readiness to accept such a striking proposal was not to be taken for granted. After all, although the German righteous deserve the honor of remembrance in their own right (P13), why should they become some kind of moral asset for other Germans? On this point, there seems to be once again preexisting agreement beyond, before, and after the twelve years of Nazi terror. As Henning von Tresckow, one of those behind the 20 July attempted assassination of Hitler, said after learning about the plot’s failure,

Now they will all fall upon us. . . . But I am convinced, now as much as ever, that we have done the right thing. . . . In a few hours’ time, I shall stand before God and answer for both my actions and the things I neglected to do. I think I can with a clear conscience stand by all I have done in the battle against Hitler. Just as God once promised Abraham that He would spare Sodom if only ten just men could be found in the city, I also have reason to hope that, for our sake, He will not destroy Germany.15

The same thought was a bridge between Tresckow and Gelber, who made use of the same scripture to justify his own open attitude toward reconciliation with the Germans: “Since God would have been willing to spare Sodom and Gomorrah if only ten righteous could be found within their walls, Israel can in no way demand a three-digit number [of German rescuers of Jewish lives].”16

15. Fabian von Schlabrendorff, The Secret War against Hitler, trans. H. Simon (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1994), 294–95. I would like to thank Simon Goldberg, former director of education of the Hong Kong Holocaust and Tolerance Centre, for directing me to this quotation.

16. Gelber, “Ich schenke Deutschland den Frieden,” 13–14. See related interpretations of the same scripture by Gollancz (P10) and Schulweis (P13). Gelber’s specific reference to the “three-digit number” (dreistellige Zahl) can be read as a mild criticism of Lüth’s claim that there were “many thousands” of German righteous, as Gelber directly addressed him and Küstermeier in the same paragraph:
This deliberate construction of the connection between the divine and the mundane was also employed in other spheres to advance the message of German-Jewish reconciliation. Rabbi Robert Raphael Geis, for example, utilized Yom Kippur to urge fellow Jews to consider the relationship between divine-human reconciliation and interhuman reconciliation. On the annual Versöhnungstag, as Yom Kippur—the Jewish day of atonement—is called in German, Rabbi Geis repeatedly reminded his fellow Jews in Germany of the “noble German individuals” (edle, deutsche Menschen)—no matter how weak their political voice was—the “good-doers (Wohltäter) among us, who . . . taught us again and again to believe in the good in man through their selflessness,” to guard against “boundless self-pity and self-importance,” and to be ready instead to “come to reconciliation even in the most terrifying suffering.” In the sermon marked “Versöhnungsfest 1960,” Rabbi Geis pointed to the fact that the book of Jonah—the unwilling Jewish prophet who was sent according to tradition by Yahweh to the pagan city of Ninive to preach the message of repentance—is part of the liturgical readings for Yom Kippur. He called Jonah the one who “would only be too eager to see God as an enraged and punishing God,” and concluded that both God and the Jewish sages have a distinct understanding of history that “is not plainly comprehensible like our history books.” He challenged his Jewish listeners to ponder their own Jonah-like resistance toward God’s granting the chance of repentance and reconciliation to the pagan wrongdoers: “It still counts for us Jews, even as we are very much against it. Yes, should it not perhaps also count for the German people, if they understand correctly their present moment, an hour of powerlessness?” Hence through theological argumentation,

“As men of the press, you must therefore first and foremost ask the few women and men who had selflessly saved Jewish lives to speak. One shouldn’t artificially enlarge their numbers” (14).

17. See chapter 2.

18. These references are found in Robert Raphael Geis, “Yom Kippur Sermons,” 1954–60, AR7263, Series II/3, Box 1, Folder 73, Papers of Robert Raphael Geis, Leo Baeck Institute, New York.

19. Ibid.
the mirroring of the divine initiative in reconciling Israel with God himself, and the Jewish readiness for reconciling with the Germans, was complete.

Rabbi Geis’s efforts with regard to German-Jewish reconciliation were not confined to religious ritual and the public podium. He also interceded in 1953, for example, for an “immaculate and decent” German youth who could no longer afford his studies as a consequence of the restitution law (Rückerstattungsgesetz) in the British zone, and asked his fellow Jew in Tel Aviv to “stretch out the hand of reconciliation” instead of demanding full restitution. Though the intercession was apparently in vain, this attempt made a lasting impression on the young German theologian, who recalled fondly his encounter with the rabbi and remained immensely thankful for his personal intervention.

Whereas Geis used his podium and personal weight as a rabbi to expand the readiness of Jews to reconcile with the Germans, Victor Gollancz deployed his publishing house and personal fame to broadcast to the wider world in the early days of the postwar period a peculiar message of reconciliation that challenges the popular understanding of repentance and forgiveness. In his Our Threatened Values, Gollancz boldly countered his British (Christian) readers who held—reasonably enough—that they would only consider forgiving the Germans after they had repented: “People who talk like that confuse the prerogative of God with the duty of man. . . . For a man to set himself up and say ‘I will forgive you, if you repent’ is to break the third commandment, and to take the name of the Lord our God in vain.”

How is that so? Like Hannah Arendt, whose argument concerning “pardon” we shall examine later in this chapter, Gollancz

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considered it blasphemous for humans to assume that they were capable of issuing “forgiveness” as if they were God or the victim himself. Rather, “forgiveness simply means, as between man and man, wishing the other well.”  

Hence, for the world to wish Germany well in this hour could only mean extending a helping hand in German repentance, rather than just sitting there and waiting for it to happen. It is a human duty, not a divine prerogative. “Most of all in need of healing are those who ordered or committed abominations, or approved of their commission, and are unrepentant; they are most in need of healing because they are unrepentant.”

The victors and the victims were duty-bound to help Germans in their repentance, Gollancz asserted, and he was sure about their success in generating the change in the “spiritual atmosphere,” the “accustomed habits of thought,” and the “dominant features” of the German character. “Can we effect the psychological transformation? . . . I am sure that we can bring this change. It is the one thing, in the political world of today, of which I am completely sure.”

If Gollancz at times sounded excessively ebullient, he might be excused for attempting to turn his largely Christian audience from the arrogance of “forgiveness-keepers” (see below) toward the humbler path of repentance-helpers and to the hope in the co-repentability, or mutual-turning, of human beings. “If we treat these Germans kindly, kindness will stir in them. . . . And if we respect them— . . . respect, by some process of mutuality, will be born in them.”

Indeed, even before Lüth urged fellow Germans to take “the first step” in reconciling with the Jews, some Jews and Germans had already taken tentative steps to reach out to each other. Aside from Gollancz, Kogon also broached the question of reconciliation between Germans and the victims of German crimes under Nazism, and of the function German Jews and other persecuted Germans could perform in this process. In 1948, he penned a

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24. Ibid.
25. Ibid.
26. Ibid., 87.
27. Ibid., 87–88.
critique, “The Policy of Reconciliation,” concerning the few cases where attempts by German youths to rebuild European towns destroyed by the Nazis had been rejected by the survivors.28 He expressed understanding for the foreign victims’ refusal but called on his fellow German victims of Nazi persecution, the Vereinigung der Verfolgten des Naziregimes (Association of Persecutees of the Nazi Regime), “to begin with ourselves, in our own country” the “policy of understanding among Germans,” which would “convince the outside world.”29 He cited the tragedy of a repentant Nazi, “a high German officer from the former Ministry of Food (Ernährungsministerium),” who had confessed to him in writing just before committing suicide. “I see in you the former concentration camp inmate, to whom I may say the following with effect for all concentration camp victims and their relatives,” Kogon quoted the German officer’s letter to him. “The anguish of my soul and my self-accusation are immeasurably great. . . . Only one thing now remains for me in front of my victims and their relatives: the plea for pardon (die Bitte um Verzeihung). Pardon me my inadequacy (Unzulänglichkeit), my lack of care (Sorgfalt) . . . ; my trust in the correctness of the proposals presented to me . . . , I know that many will not pardon me. But that shall not be a reason for me to fail to plead for pardon. May God be a merciful judge for me.”30 Kogon, like Geis, urged his fellow surviving victims to be ready to reconcile with their former perpetrators who had turned to them for help, so that suicide would not remain their only “atonement” option: “This man was not guiltier than most of us. . . . he sought, in his own way, to atone (sühnen) for [his guilt]. We must extend the hand of reconciliation (die Hand der Versöhnung reichen) to all those who are still alive and of his spirit. Then it will once again be well for Germany; sustainable (nachhaltig), and perhaps even soon.”31

29. Ibid., 319 (emphasis in the original).
30. Ibid., 324.
31. Ibid.
As Kogon rightly saw, without the readiness on the part of the victims to reconcile (which is not to be automatically equated with “to forgive,” as we shall see further below), the perpetrators’ or their representatives’ repentance efforts would have no hope of restoring the damaged relationship. This simple truth was perhaps best reflected in the early history of the ASF, which depended on the goodwill of the receiving communities at every step to complete their “atonement work” there. Yet in offering their readiness to reconcile, the survivors and the bereaved were also taking great risks: wouldn’t this “reconciliation” be misconstrued as “foreclosure” of the past, which was in reality not even “past”—that is, the unresolved issues of justice, restitution, cultural transformation, and so on? Wouldn’t this turning—like any other genuine turning—be abused by those who seek to cover up with cosmetics the still festering wounds, rather than to reveal and to heal them?

In this regard, Lothar Kreyssig, founder of the ASF, exhibited a keen awareness of this dilemma of the victims. For, in fact, the organization was in the beginning called Aktion Versöhnungszeichen—that is, “symbol of reconciliation” instead of “atonement”—expressing the goal of the German founders and volunteers to achieve reconciliation with the victims. But soon enough, Kreyssig was advised to change its name from “reconciliation” to “atonement” because of the hidden arrogance in the perpetrator’s claim of reconciliation, which could be counterproductive. Kreyssig wrote: “[Erich Müller-Gangloff] suggests that we gradually rename the Aktion as Sühnezeichen, with the convincing justification that atonement comes from the guilty, whereas reconciliation is essentially mutual and unthinkable as a symbol without

32. See Karl-Klaus Rabe, Umkehr in die Zukunft: Die Arbeit der Aktion Sühnezeichen/Friedensdienste (Bornheim-Merten: Lamuv Verlag, 1983); and Gabriele Kammerer, Aktion Sühnezeichen Friedensdienste: Aber man kann es einfach tun (Göttingen: Lamuv Verlag, 2008).

33. In the original “call” for the creation of the organization, “Wir bitten um Frieden,” published on 30 Apr. 1958, the “good works” to be accomplished were conceived as “symbols of reconciliation,” and the name Aktion Versöhnungszeichen already appeared. See Rabe, Umkehr in die Zukunft, 14–15.
the consent of the wounded.”  

Furthermore, for Kreyssig, even this atonement is only possible when enabled by the victim; it is not something that the guilty can “achieve” on their own: “Atonement (Sühne) happens when the wounded considers the regret (Reue) shown to him and grants forgiveness (Vergebung). It can only be asked for (erbitten), but not proclaimed (proklamieren).”

In this way, the “atoning Germans” tried to make it lighter for the surviving victims and their communities to accept their volunteer work—just as these made their burden lighter by accepting it—through removing the implicit requirement or unilateral declaration of reconciliation and all the collateral connotations. The naming of the initiative as Sühnezeichen was in a way not to take the victims’ reconciliation-readiness for granted, while at the same time expressing the founders’ and volunteers’ perseverance with the identity of the guilty (P6), even as they themselves might not be guilty in any direct sense. This makes the ASF unique among the “peace” volunteer organizations in postwar Germany (e.g., Pax Christi), whose names do not embed this assumption of guilt—in both senses of the word—thus conflating “doing good” with “repairing wrong,” one’s own wrong. This uniqueness is based on the insight of the ASF concerning the contribution of guilt consciousness to interpeople reconciliation. As Kreyssig explained, “In the relationship between people and people, such an entreaty [of atonement] is only realistic when the wounded is informed about who is sponsoring the entreaty with his willingness to bring symbolic, personal sacrifice; otherwise it becomes cheap and noncommittal.”

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36. The addition of Friedensdienste (Peace Services) to the name in 1968 thus reflects, in my view, this resurgent ambivalence, which Kreyssig had overcome at the beginning. Ibid., 80.

between ASF volunteers and the victim communities of Nazi Germany attests to this.  

For his engagement with Israel, Lüth also received a new name, “Israelüth,” which the Israeli press favorably spread. And this name was cited within intra-Jewish dialogue as that of the one German who had publicly confessed to the Jews, thus making German atonement in the form of Wiedergutmachung less unacceptable. Though certainly not the first to confess German guilt in public, as we have seen previously (P2), the initiative of Lüth is to be credited for directly generating further public confessions in (West) Germany. Take the “confession of Freiburg students” in 1952, who protested against the screening of a new production by Harlan. In one of these protests, in which about 800 students were reported to have taken part, a student representative said: “It is a gross distortion of the facts that since we did not want to forget, we are accused of being unpeaceable (Unfriedfertigkeit). We want peace! But peace with Israel is more important for us than peace with Mr. Harlan!”

The Freiburg students’ declaration could count as one of those public confessions by German groups that specifically targeted the Jewish audience. These included Christian (both Protestant and Catholic) statements concerning the so-called Jewish question (Judenfrage) issued in the early postwar period. The “Message Concerning the Jewish Question” was issued in 1948 by the leaders of the Confessing Church.

38 Bernhard Krane et al., eds., Aktion Sühnezeichen Friedensdienste in Israel: 1961–2011; Geschicht(e)n erleben (Berlin/Jerusalem: Aktion Sühnezeichen Friedensdienste, 2011).


40 Walter A. Berendsohn, a German Jew in Hamburg, was once challenged by an Israeli politician who was against the acceptance of the “blood money” from Germany: “Give me one single German name who has confessed to the guilt against the Jews.” Berendsohn sent him Lüth’s petition. Lüth, Friedensbitte, 146–47.


issued their own “resolution” on the “Jewish question” during the Katholikentag. And in 1950, the EKD Synod issued the Berlin-Weißensee “declaration” clarifying the status of Judaism in Evangelical thought. Comparing these statements, we can see the relative emphases of the different Christian groups, as well as similar pitfalls and subsequent rectification in these confessions.

The earliest of these, the “message” of 1948, was also the most controversial because of its ambiguous attitude toward the Jews. While on the one hand, it confessed Christian guilt vis-à-vis Israel (see P2)—as a correction to the 1947 Darmstadt statement in which no specific word was dedicated to turning to the victims although it aimed at “reconciliation,” as if absolution through faith alone were enough—it remained mired in the lingering anti-Judaism in its theology, which was at the very least one contributor to modern antisemitism. Aside from upholding the traditional theological view that the election of Israel had, since Christ, been “transferred” (übergegangen) to the church, the 1948 “message” also seemed to entertain the view that Jewish suffering was the result of their own failure to “convert” (bekehren).

The Catholic confession issued in the same year had similar shortcomings. When it urged all Christians to shun the “resurgent antisemitism,” it simultaneously argued that only as “loving ones” could they draw home the entire Jewish people, in effect upholding the continual negation of Judaism. The Catholic confession differed from the Protestant statement in its emphasis on reparation (Wiedergutmachung), the return of ill-gotten properties to their original Jewish owners. As a participant in the Catholic discussion of the “Jewish question” put it, “The Jews have a valid claim against us for indemnification.”

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45. See sections 3 and 5 of the 1948 “Botschaft.”
46. See sections b and c of the Catholic “resolution.”
Thus anti-Judaic streams of thought continued even as Christian communities attempted to confess their guilt toward the Jews. Hence concern on the part of the Jews about uttering the words “reconciliation” or “peace” prematurely was not without reason. In this regard, the 1950 Berlin-Weißensee “Erklärung” was a much-needed clarification indeed, for it challenged head-on a long-standing pillar of Christian anti-Judaism: the unequal standing of the “old” and the “new” peoples of God. In contradistinction to the 1948 “message,” the “declaration” began by affirming the continual validity of Judaism:

We believe that God’s promise for his chosen people of Israel remains in force (in Kraft geblieben ist) even after the crucifixion of Jesus Christ.\(^\text{48}\)

And instead of holding up “Jewish fate” and “Israel under judgment” as a warning to Christians, as the 1948 “message” had, the “declaration” turned to the German catastrophe as a caution:

We warn all Christians not to set off (aufrechnen) what we have done to the Jews against what has come upon us Germans as God’s judgment; for in judgment, God’s hand seeks the repentant (Bußfertigen).\(^\text{49}\)

During the discussion on the text of the 1950 Protestant declaration, some participants doubted whether confessing before the world, and especially before those who had collaborated with the Nazis, was appropriate. Martin Niemöller, who was also present, argued vehemently against this attitude of comparing and scaling guilt: “I confess to be guiltier than many an SS,” the pastor said.\(^\text{50}\)

In other words, if a resister from the Confessing Church could consider himself no less guilty than an active perpetrator of Nazi crimes, what justified objection could a German bystander have to confessing before Nazi collaborators? Kreyssig, who would found the Aktion Sühnezeichen eight years later, concurred and supported Niemöller: “Brothers! None of us attempted to join the

\(^{48}\) “Erklärung zur Judenfrage in Berlin-Weißensee.”

\(^{49}\) Ibid.

\(^{50}\) Quoted in “Erklärung zur Judenfrage in Berlin-Weißensee.”
ride to the gas camps. God has once shown me this way to the east; in the evening, I was willing; the next morning, I became a coward. Hence repentance! Let us confess our guilt before God and before man!

Such expression of guilt-consciousness—even when real guilt wasn’t conspicuous—never failed to gain an appreciative hearing from the victims. In his book, *Jenseits von Schuld und Sühne* (Beyond Guilt and Atonement), Jean Améry recalled approvingly Thomas Mann’s public confession, “Germany and the Germans,” which he had made in the United States right after the end of the war. After citing the letter of a German youth who was “fed up” with accusations of the “guilt of the fathers” (P12), who sought to find escape instead in the “guilt of the others” (P8), Améry affirmed his factual innocence but wished he had a bit of Thomas Mann’s guilt-consciousness based on a responsible (and realistic) attitude toward his own national tradition:

Thomas Mann knew that, as he wrote in his essay “Germany and the Germans,” “it is quite impossible for one born there (deutschgeborener Geist) simply to . . . declare: ‘I am the good, the noble, the just Germany in the white robe.’ . . . Not a word of all that I have just told you about Germany . . . came out of alien, cool, objective knowledge, it is all within me, I have been through it all.” . . . I can only hope that German youths do not find it too difficult to connect themselves with Thomas Mann.

While attentive to and appreciative of German confessions like Mann’s, Améry was not the typical turner we have seen so far: on the one hand, his unique voice demonstrated the strength of the Jewish victim’s willingness to speak to the perpetrators and bystanders—even self-admittedly without any religious

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51. Quoted in “Erklärung zur Judenfrage in Berlin-Weißensee.”


inspiration; but on the other hand, it also laid bare some of the limits of the non-three-dimensional view of the victim-perpetrator relationship (R2).

Unlike other Jewish turners, Améry was against not only the idea of forgiveness, but also reconciliation itself. He lambasted those Jewish turners who were not themselves—strictly speaking—victims. In explaining why “resentment” had become his “existential dominant,” he said: “The Jews who were at the moment shaking before the forgiveness- and reconciliation-pathos, whether a Victor Gollancz or Martin Buber, were almost as unpleasant (unangenehm) to me as those others . . . hurrying from the US, from England or France to Germany, West or East, in order to play the role of the so-called reeducator (Umerzieher).”

“Hence my least inclination toward reconcilability (Versöhnlichkeit), more precisely: the conviction that the loudly demonstrated reconciliation-readiness (Versöhnungsbereitschaft) of victims of Nazism can only be either dullness in feeling (Stumpffähigkeit) and indifference to life (Lebensindifferenz) or masochistic conversion of suppressed, genuine demand for revenge (Racheforderung). . . . Indeed, the dull-feeling and indifferent one forgives. He lets the past (Geschehene) be, just as it was.”

Repeatedly, Améry referred to himself as “unreconcilable,” and to his “nasty unreconcilability.” His work was to explain to the Germans his resentments against them: “I speak as a victim and examine my resentments (Ressentiments).” “I bore Germany a grudge for the twelve years of Hitler . . . , I harbored my

56. Ibid., 106. Elsewhere he also disparaged Hannah Arendt (48), and “men born Jewish like Gabriel Marcel” (108), whom he accused of having either underestimated human evil or presented the Holocaust as if it were an “industrial accident” (Betriebsunfall).
57. Améry, Jenseits von Schuld und Sühne, 114.
58. Ibid., 115.
59. Ibid., 102. Améry’s use of Ressentiments is essentially different from the usual understanding of resentment. See below and Melanie Steiner Sherwood, “Jean Améry and Wolfgang Hildesheimer: Ressentiments, Melancholia, and the West German Public Sphere in the 1960s and 1970s” (PhD diss., Cornell University, 2011).
resentments. And since I neither can nor want to let go of them, I have to live with them and am duty-bound to illuminate them to those whom they are directed against.”

For a human being who has undergone extreme torture to be commanded (whether by himself or by others) to bow down to the social pressure of forgiveness and reconciliation is tantamount to his suffering a new injury. For Améry, who had experienced just that, the experience in the camps had utterly shattered the foundation of his self-understanding as an intellectual. In Auschwitz, he said, unless one was sheltered by “religious or political faith,” which he as an agnostic was not, “the intellect (Geist) was useless, or as useful as nothing.”

“With the first blow, this confidence in the world (Weltvertrauen) collapses. The other . . . forces his own physicality upon me with the first blow. He is at me and exterminates (vernichten) me through it. It is like rape (Vergewaltigung).”

Nevertheless, Améry’s Ressentiments were not conceived as a kind of perpetual punishment for its own sake. Rather, they were presented as a Jewish contribution to German turning, and to his own envisioned German-Jewish “cooperation.” Referring to the early postwar years when German self-pity was a widespread malaise, Améry said: “The Germans, who understood themselves as a people of victims (Opfervolk) and nothing else . . . were all too understandably not inclined to do more than—what was called at that time—coming to terms (bewältigen) with the past of the Third Reich in their own way. In those days, when the Germans simultaneously conquered the world markets with their industrial products and were, not without a certain sense of being compensated (Ausgeglichenheit), busy with coming to terms (Bewältigung) at home, our—or perhaps more reservedly said, my—resentments surged.”

And the way toward a “co-human” future was prescribed in a German-Jewish mutuality. “Settlement could be had when resentment continues to exist in one camp, and, as aroused

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61. Ibid., 31.
62. Ibid., 52.
63. Ibid., 107.
by it, self-mistrust (Selbstmißtrauen) in the other. Alone through the prick of the spurs of our resentments—and not in the least through a subjectively almost always dubious reconcilability, which is also objectively hostile to history (geschichtsfeindlich)—the German people would remain sensitive to the fact that a piece of their national history may not be neutralized by time, that it has to be integrated.”

In this broader perspective, Améry was similar to other Jewish turners, who sought to offer a viable way out of the “German problem,” in which German-Jewish cooperation was deemed necessary (P6). His recipe of mutual-turning might sound comparatively “harsh”—not only to the Germans he was speaking to, but also to the victims like himself, for resentment, as he frankly conceded, “is not only an anti-natural, but also a logically contradictory condition. It nails each of us firmly to the cross of his shattered past. Absurdly it demands that the irreversible be reversed, the occurrence be unoccurred. Resentment blocks the exit to what is really the human dimension, the future.” The worse condition, however, is to say “Peace! Peace!” when there is no peace. “The man of resentment cannot . . . join in the monotonous, ubiquitous peace choir, which cheerfully proposes: Let us not look backward, but forward to a better, common future!” Hence Améry’s resentment was in no way expressed as a complete and irreversible severance of relationship.

64. Ibid., 124. “Settlement” (Austragung) was the word used repeatedly by Améry in place of “reconciliation” or “forgiveness.”
65. He also shared what is characteristic of Jewish memory: remembering the righteous (P13). He recalled those Germans who had shown him even the least gesture of kindness, such as the Wehrmacht soldier who had given him a cigarette after his torture, for instance. These gestures were too few, however, to counter the victim’s belief that “Hitler was the German people.” Améry, Jenseits von Schuld und Sühne, 118–19.
67. Ibid.
68. This stance of Améry’s is clearly shown in Sherwood’s work, “Jean Améry and Wolfgang Hildesheimer.”
“laying claim to one’s own negative property” that he was offering to the Germans would have been superfluous, and there would have been no dialogue to begin with. To the contrary, he referred once again to Thomas Mann as a prototypical German intellectual demonstrating what he meant by “self-mistrust”:

Remaining in his exclusively literary reference system, Thomas Mann has spoken about this in a letter: “It is perhaps superstitious . . . but in my eyes, the books that could be printed at all in Germany between 1933 and 1945 are less than worthless. . . . An odor of blood and shame clings to them; they should all be pulverized.” The intellectual pulverization (geistige Einstampfung) through the German people, not just books, but everything that was performed in the twelve years, would be the negation of negation: a highly positive, saving act. Only then would the resentment become subjectively satisfied and objectively unnecessary.

What really sets Améry apart from other Jewish turners—at least those he himself has identified—is their different ways of perceiving the victim-perpetrator relationship. The three-dimensional way of seeing divine-human and interhuman relationships that comes with the biblical paradigm of repentance has allowed other turners to perceive the victim-perpetrator relationship in ways that are otherwise inconceivable. Rabbi Geis, for example, could say matter-of-factly that “because we were the beaten ones and not the ones beating, the persecuted and not the persecutors, we can say thanks.” In other words, the downtrodden are not—by way of persecution—“lowered” in any essential, fundamental sense; rather, it is the wrongdoers who have lowered themselves through their own wrongdoing. This only makes sense when a divine order of relationships centering around a just God who takes sides with the persecuted is perceived to be present beside the purely social one.

69. Améry, Jenseits von Schuld und Sühne, 125.
70. Ibid., 125–26.
and takes precedence over it. This doesn’t make sense when what is seen and felt as social, interpersonal humiliation is reckoned as humiliation and nothing else—that is, what is “lost” as human dignity by the victims is “gained” by the perpetrators, and there is no “god” whatsoever to even this inequality out on the victims’ behalf.

This seems to be the case with Améry, who, though showing an acute awareness and appreciation of the religious paradigm of his fellow persecuted Jews, chose not to adopt it for himself. He spoke about “settling” (austragen) with the perpetrators, not through revenge, but through encountering the victims in their state of helplessness and hopelessness. “[The torturer] is lord over flesh and spirit, life and death. . . . There were moments when I had a kind of shameful reverence (schmähliche Verehrung) for the sovereignty of the torturers, which they exercised over me. For is he not God or at least a half god, who can turn a man so totally to mere body and whimpering death-prey?”

“It is not about revenge, nor atonement. . . . The experience of torture was in the final analysis the extreme loneliness (Einsamkeit). For me, it is about the release (Erlösung) from this still perpetuating abandonment (Verlassensein). . . . [The perpetrator being led to his execution] was in this moment with me—and I was not alone anymore.”

“The mastering one and the mastered one . . . would encounter each other at the meeting point of the wish for time-reversal (Zeitumkehrung) and for the moralizing of history.”

This perpetrator-above-victim paradigm, though corresponding to fact as actually seen and experienced, is markedly different from that founded on the three-dimensional way of seeing relationships. Arendt, for instance, sketched in her Denkstagebuch in 1950 the broad outlines of the triangular relationship burdened by human wrongdoing:

Injustice done is the burden on one’s shoulders, which one carries because he has loaded it upon himself. . . . The burden, which he has loaded upon his shoulders, can only be removed (abnehmen) by God. . . .

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73. Ibid., 63–64.
74. Ibid., 113 (emphasis in the original).
75. Ibid., 125.
man who reconciles simply co-loads (sich mitladen) the burden upon the shoulders voluntarily, which the other carries in any case. That is, he reestablishes equality (Gleichheit).\textsuperscript{76}

In other words, the perpetrator did not “elevate” himself in any sense by his wrongdoing, just as the victim was not “lowered” by it. Quite the contrary: guilt as burden drags down the wrongdoer.

The two paradigms are so diametrically different that there doesn’t seem to be any easy way to bridge the two through rational argument; rather, the very assumption of the most fundamental issues seems to be at stake—on which no outsider of a particular relationship is warranted to make judgment. What is relevant to us as social observers and participants is the question of substitute: for those victims who are unable or unwilling to adopt the three-dimensional paradigm, what can society do to help “elevate” their self-perception after abject dehumanization? Améry himself had hinted at social recognition as a possible alternative, though it was probably nowhere near enough as a full substitute for the faith-oriented restitution: “What can people like us still demand, more than that German newspapers and radio stations grant us the possibility to be coarse and tactless toward the German people and still get paid for that? I know, even the most well-meaning ones will become at the end impatient with us. . . . We victims must ‘get done with’ (fertigwerden) the reactive grudge. . . . We must and will soon be done with that. Until then, we ask for patience from those whose peace is disturbed by our grudge-bearing (Nachträgerei).”\textsuperscript{77}

Yet despite the differences of the two paradigms, the example of Améry’s Ressentiments shows that it would be erroneous to assume that only from the religious viewpoint or by adopting an overtly religious language can one contribute to the process of three-dimensional turning of the other. Indeed, the kind of superficial and premature “reconcilability” that he was really criticizing could be counter-turning, that is, when “reconciliation” takes


place at the cost of—instead of *through*—thoroughgoing repentance. While one may argue that his pronounced “unreconcilability” was just as counter-turning (for if taken out of context, it could be read as *indifference* to German repentance), his offer of self-disclosure and insights to the “resented” did provide a viable answer to German youths struggling with the German question of coming to terms with the past. Such answers would not have come about either in “forgiveness” without turning or in definitive separation in the form of noncommunication, both of which can be derived from religious or nonreligious perspectives.\(^78\)

As also brought out by Améry’s *Ressentiments*, the question of forgiveness is indeed unavoidable in any discussion of reconciliation, especially when there is so much social expectation—or even *demand*—for it, that the victims risk being blamed if they don’t forgive.\(^79\) In closing this chapter, we will examine some Jewish critiques of “forgiving,” as well as some contemporary German adaptations that have distorted their original message.

As already mentioned above, Gollancz considered those who demanded repentance before they would grant forgiveness “blasphemous,” for in the human sphere, forgiveness can only mean “wishing well,” and one’s task in facing a sinner (or a nation of sinners) is to help them repent—not to consider when or whether one would “issue” forgiveness.\(^80\) Arendt’s understanding of “pardon” (*Verzeihung*) and “reconciliation” (*Versöhnung*) as revealed in her *Denktagebuch*—which gives important insights into her contributions in German-Jewish turning from “Organisierte Schuld” to *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (P1)—concurred with Gollancz’s skepticism

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\(^78\). Economic interests, the assessment of post-Holocaust German-Jewish relations based on an alternative interpretation of the biblical passages concerning the Amalekites (see R13), as well as Confucius’s dictum “not to live under the same heaven” with the murderers of one’s own parents (Liji, Tan Gong I), are just some of the possible sources.

\(^79\). “I am burdened with collective guilt, I say I: not they. The world that forgives and forgets has condemned me instead of those who murdered or let murder happen.” Améry, *Jenseits von Schuld und Sühne*, 120 (emphasis in the original).

\(^80\). Gollancz, *Our Threatened Values*, 84.
concerning “forgiving,” or more precisely, the condescension of those who deem themselves fit to forgive. For Arendt, there is pardon only between those who are in principle qualitatively separated from one another: the parents can pardon the children, so long as they are children, because of the absolute superiority (Überlegenheit). The gesture of pardon destroys equality (Gleichheit)—and thus the foundation of human relationships—so radically that actually after such an act no relationship is possible anymore. . . . Pardon, or what is commonly called as such, is in truth only a hypocritical process (Scheinvorgang), in which one behaves superciliously (überlegen) while the other demands what human beings can neither give nor remove (abnehmen). The fake process exists in that the burden on one’s shoulders is ostensibly taken away by the other, who presents himself as unburdened (unbelastet). . . . Pardon is perhaps possible, insofar as it is only the explicit recognition of “we are all sinners,” that is, it claims that everyone could have done that, and in this way it establishes an equality—not of rights, but of nature. Pharisaism is then the arrogance (Anmassung) of not being willing to recognize the equality of human beings. 81

Juxtaposed to this “pardon,” “reconciliation” was championed by Arendt—though with reservation on its effect—as the more humanly appropriate attitude toward addressing the aftermath of human injustice: “Reconciliation with the other is . . . not a hypocritical process, for it does not pretend to accomplish what is impossible to do—it does not promise the exoneration (Entlastung) of the other, and does not act in one’s own unburdenedness (Unbelastetheit). . . . Reconciliation is the exact opposite of pardon, which generates inequality.” 82

This attitude of humility before God—that is, challenging human “superiority” to grant each other forgiveness on unequal footings—is matched by another Jewish attitude that is equally critical about such arrogance but is expressed in a slightly different form and is ultimately based on humility before the real, individual victims. This second attitude is at present articulated most

81. Arendt, Denktagebuch, 3–4 (emphasis in the original). I would like to thank the late Thomas Hollweck for directing me to this text.
82. Arendt, Denktagebuch, 3–4 (emphasis in the original).
succinctly and persistently by someone who had left Buchenwald as a child and ended up as the chief rabbi of Israel—Rabbi Israel Meir Lau. On 11 April 1995, the fiftieth anniversary commemoration of the liberation of the Buchenwald concentration camp, Rabbi Lau spoke as one of the invited speakers. “I’m not coming here to forgive,” he told the audience, probably shocking those who had expected nothing but benevolent (and somnolent) words from world religious leaders. “My murdered family and the six million dead have given me no mandate for that.” On another occasion of commemoration, the rabbi reiterated his message in conjunction with the Jewish duty to remember (P13): “We cannot forget, it’s impossible to forget, and we are not authorized to forgive.”

If Lau was out to attract sympathy for the Jewish victims and the surviving Jews, he would probably have done no better by donning a conciliatory and all-forgiving tone. Yet it was apparently not his primary concern when speaking to the world. Rather, his message was a challenge to unwarranted representative forgiveness and its detrimental effects. He was consistent in his refusal to grant forgiveness—or rather, to pretend he had the representative authority to do so—on the same moral ground. In his autobiography, he recalled a delegation of 500 members of Christian denominations coming to see him in Jerusalem in 1999 to seek forgiveness for the “Christian” crusades: “I replied that I had neither the mandate to grant pardon nor the power to forgive. I did express my honest appreciation for the fact that they had come to Jerusalem. . . . But, I clarified, in no way did the presentation of [the request for forgiveness] to me erase the past or forgive its despicable sins.”

In another instance, a Japanese Buddhist leader, Etai Yamada, also

83. Rabbi Lau was the Ashkenazi chief rabbi of Israel for ten years until 2003.
approached Lau for forgiveness. “As a member of the nation that aided the killers, I am guilty of the murder of your parents,” the venerable monk said. The rabbi once again declined to act as he was bidden: “I explained to the Japanese leader, I did not know if I had the mandate to forgive him in the name of the victims. As for myself, I had one mission to fulfill: to remember, and not permit the world to forget. Still I emphasized my great appreciation for his honest statement.”

In understanding these Jewish voices—Lau’s, Arendt’s, Gollancz’s, and also Buber’s—which express doubt concerning human “forgiving,” especially on behalf of the victims who had perished, it is important to distinguish this attitude from the unwillingness to forgive. The first does not presume oneself to have the authority to issue forgiveness (whether on God’s or the victims’ behalf); the second takes it for granted but refuses—for whatever reasons—to grant it. In fact, one is hard pressed to find a single instance in which the second attitude (i.e., “I will not forgive you—although I’m qualified to do so!”) was demonstrated by these turners. Rather, it has been expressed—in an ironic twist—during some recent protests in Germany against neo-Nazis. “Kein Vergeben! Kein Vergessen!” (No forgiving! No forgetting!) or “Nichts vergeben! Nichts vergessen! (Forgive nothing! Forget nothing!) was their mantra.

Though the general opposition of the German populace to the ebbs and flows of neo-Nazism within their neighborhood and to old Nazis at large is to be appreciated, it is certainly not within a protestor’s “mandate” to grant and to deny forgiveness. As Abraham Heschel has said in different contexts, “Even God Himself can only

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87. Ibid., 310–11.
89. It is most probably not, to be fair, the anti-Nazi protesters’ intention to claim the victims’ privilege to deny forgiveness, for there can always be qualifications attached to the “no forgiving” clause. But this is precisely the problem of reducing a complex and theologically rich insight (i.e., unwarranted representative forgiveness) to a catchy banner slogan, which carries certain resemblance to its original source but generates misleading implications of its own, which can in turn
forgive sins committed against Himself, not against man.”

The same goes, of course, also for the preclusion of forgiveness.

Despite the lack of “forgiving”—or because of the perpetual drive toward repentance due precisely to this “empty chair” of forgiveness?—there is little cause today for Germans traveling to Israel to take the kind of precautions necessary in Lüth’s time.

Furthermore, since 1993 the “atoning Germans” of the ASF have been bringing Israeli volunteers to Germany (certainly not to make Sühnezeichen but perhaps Versöhnungszeichen), and that is not to mention the growing and thriving Jewish communities in the Federal Republic after 1989.

None of these developments, to be sure, means “reconciliation achieved” or the “end of repentance,” which are dubious goals in themselves. They do mean, however, that the German-Jewish relationship, damaged and burdened as it is by the crimes of Nazi Germany, is not dilapidated beyond resuscitation. In fact, one might even ask: When in the history of German-Jewish interaction has such a state of relationship occurred? Or are we not witnessing something new altogether?

At the end of “Israelüth’s” first visit to the promised land, he couldn’t help being envious of another German who had found

overshadow the original insight. The fact that neo-Nazis are now also using this slogan to commemorate their “victims” should be an occasion for clarification.

90. See Heschel’s contribution in Simon Wiesenthal, *The Sunflower: On the Possibilities and Limits of Forgiveness*, revised and expanded ed. (New York: Schocken Books, 1998), 164–66. Previously, Heschel had expressed the same idea in a 1963 speech, “Religion and Race,” addressing the problem of racism in the United States. In this earlier context, Heschel was speaking as a white person to whites, pointing to the necessity of turning to the black victims, not just seeking forgiveness through religious services among whites. Hence the nuanced formulation: “It is not within the power of God to forgive the sins committed toward men. We must first ask for forgiveness of those whom our society has wronged before asking for the forgiveness of God.” See Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Insecurity of Freedom: Essays on Human Existence* (New York: Schocken Books, 1972), 89.

91. According to Katharina von Münster, former ASF representative in Israel, every German volunteer—and their parents—worried about Israeli hatred against the Germans before they came. Yet all returned surprised by its actual absence. Interview with Katharina von Münster, 15 Oct. 2010, Jerusalem.

the love of Israeli Jews—the German-Israeli actress Orna Porat. “The young actress has already established the bridge of human understanding,” Lüth told his German readers, “which we all are still seeking.” With the wealth of examples lived out by the pioneering turners before them, Germans and Jews of today facing old and new challenges to their renewed relationship are well equipped to find that “way” of mutual-turning to each other—which some other peoples torn by wrongdoings in the past are still seeking.