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Integral for the Masses

Germany—A personal odyssey

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What I love most about writing this column is the way that it never ceases to amaze me how the challenges laid down by my beloved editor force me to explore dark, hidden pockets of my psyche that I would never have thought about venturing into. I guess it is a form of therapy, but not one that I enter into too willingly.

When I was informed that this issue of *Integral Leadership Review* was going to be focused on Germany, my immediate reaction was, “WTF do I have to say about Germany from either an Integral or Leadership perspective?” I started to compile a list of reasons why I might be recused from writing such an article, but realized that “the cat pee’d on my keyboard” had probably been overdone, and that I was probably about fifth in line to offer it up as an excuse.

However, as I thought harder, it dawned upon me that for better or worse, consciously or unconsciously, Germany has played an influential role throughout my life, and has contributed strongly to this collection of experiences that I loosely label as “Me”. If I am serious in my desires to understand who I am, how I got to this moment in time and how I embrace life moving forward, to do so without confronting the role that Germany has played in my life would at best be a case of denial, and at worst could be hiding shadow manifestations that serve neither myself nor those I love as I live out the remainder of this mortal incarnation.

Germany has always loomed large on the horizon for me. I was born almost at the midpoint of the post World War II Baby Boom in a suburb of London just under 700 miles due West of Berlin. My parents were “blitz kids” evacuated from London at the start of the Battle of Britain and both independently brought back to London by their families -- my mother because a damaged Luftwaffe bomber dropped its payload in the village where she had been sent; my father because his older brothers decided that he was unsafe in the house where they were living. In both cases, there was an unshakeable belief by my parents that they were personally placed in extensive risk due to actions of the German nation, and this deeply influenced both my sister and myself during our formative years.

My Grandparents were Belorussian and Romanian Jews; both sets were driven out of their homes at the end of the 19th Century. My maternal grandparents sought to escape the pogroms which were in full flow

around Minsk; my paternal grandparents were accused, unfairly, of being horse thieves and escaped within an inch of their lives as the local mob was beating a path to their door to exact justice Romanian style. Both arrived in the East End of London, to a hostile and anti-Semitic welcome, but compared to that from which they had escaped, it was if they had found heaven. Interestingly, both families were on their way to America; however, the arrival, with regular monotony, of several children put a damper on those plans.

The shadow thrown by the rise of the Nazi party loomed large on my extended family. The marches by Oswald Mosley into the heartland of British Jews and the Battle of Cable street were, for my grandparents at least, flashes of “deja vue all over again” as Yogi Berra would famously state several decades later. The stories creeping out of Germany and the Anschlussed territories drove fear into my grandparents hearts, and in an attempt to protect the innocence of their children were only talked about in whispers creating an environment of fear and behaviors less than conducive for developing self-esteem.

In the late 30's, according to my grandparents, everybody in the pressurized micro-society that was the East End of London were discussing not “if” but “when” the war would start. When Neville Chamberlain returned from meeting with Chancellor Hitler, papers in hand declaring “Peace in our times,” my paternal grandparents took steps to protect their sons. At a family meeting it was decided that the family would change its name by deed-poll from Cohen to Bellamy. The logic was unassailable: War was coming; most of the boys would be conscripted into the army; the potential to be captured was high; the consequences of having a Jewish name were unthinkable. Interestingly, only one of my uncles was captured by the Germans towards the end of the war, and he was the only one who refused to change his name. Luckily, the commandant of his prison camp was old school German Military who attempted to follow the Geneva Convention. To this day, that uncle still ponders what might have happened if he had been imprisoned under the command of an SS officer.

With hindsight, this act of survival by five out of six brothers was effectively a denial of their culture and heritage, the abandoning of their name, effectively led most of the family choosing to abandon their religious tradition. On more than one occasion I would hear relatives in the midst of debate, declare “God abandoned us, so now I am abandoning God.” It took me almost 40 years to recognize this aspect of causality and the linkage between the influence of Germany and my own estrangement from my culture and heritage.

One of my earliest memories is of looking out of our apartment's window at a plot of land full of rubble and overgrown with vegetation. When I asked my mother why it didn't have any houses or shops, she would hiss back, “because of the Germans.” It was only some years later that I came to understand that the plot had been destroyed either from the carpet bombing at the start of the World War II (which for our American cousins really did start in September 1939), or by a V1 or V2 missile towards the end of the war. Most importantly, I was told in no uncertain terms never to enter any of these sites. Many were still littered with live munitions. Worse still, even safe locations such as landscaped parks would, from time to time, uncover the occasional unexploded ordinance. During my childhood, it was fairly commonplace to hear the sirens of the local constabulary escorting the local bomb disposal team to take care of yet another “suspect” piece of old metal that had been uncovered by kids playing in supposedly safe environments.

Unknowingly, Germany had a greater impact on my early formative years than I could ever have been aware of. “Because of the Germans” became a meme that influenced and affected my behaviors from the beginning of my life. But it wasn't just from my own familial influences that Germany impacted upon; with hindsight I recognize this country in the center of Europe had a major impact on my own development. Everywhere one

looked we were reminded that we had won the war (I know that our American cousins might have a slightly difficult perspective on this), and even though we were losing the peace, it didn't really matter.

The comic books designed to influence the minds of growing 8-year olds were full of stories of British underdogs facing overwhelming odds against the dastardly "Bosch" and "Hun", who were rarely named and if they were would always be called "Fritz". Our smiling hero who would take on the enemy single-handedly often unarmed or able to call upon a conveniently available cricket bat to crack a few heads was normally called "Caruthers" or "Fortescue-Smythe." At break-time (recess) in the school yard we would reenact the Battle of Britain, arms stretched wide pretending to be a Spitfire or Hurricane downing yet another Messerschmitt as we protected the motherland from the intended Blitzkrieg. It never once crossed our minds that nobody ever took the role of the enemy in these fantasies.

In retrospect long before I reached double-figures, I was well and truly brainwashed. We won the war. Germany and its inhabitants were our mortal enemy, even though history would show it was the French we had been battling against for most of the past millennium. Economically, things were going from bad to worse. Nobody believed Harold MacMillan when he told us on the 20th July 1957 "we had never had it so good!" As German products started to make their way into the UK, often displacing British products at the luxury end of their market segments, there were some murmurs, but few were able to question whether the myth we were being spun had any basis in reality.

As German cars started to replace the grand old British Marques on the street, the heroes who returned from the trenches of Europe and the deserts of North Africa were finding that their jobs at Austin, Morris and Triumph, to name but a few, were being replaced by workers from Volkswagen, BMW and Mercedes Benz (the Japanese followed later). Particularly, in the case of the "Merc" some of my peers chose to demonstrate their alpha male qualities by stealing the car's badge symbols and wearing them on chains as some slightly perverse symbols of honor.

By the time I was selected to study German in high school the Pavlovian conditioning was pretty much complete. As a group we would goose-step into the classroom holding a comb under our nose to represent a Hitlerian moustache, one hand extended crying out "Seig Heil!" Our teacher would smile benignly with a look in his eyes that was a mix of "boys will be boys" and "well after all we won the war didn't we?" As we tried to turn our minds to understanding the language that has underpinned much of modern Western Philosophy, gave birth to psychoanalysis, not to mention exquisite poetry and some of the most beautiful music ever written, we took it all very much as a joke. As one wag was wont to say, frequently, "no wonder the Krauts lost the war, by putting all the verbs at the end of a sentence they had to wait so long to work out what they were supposed to do we had an unfair advantage." Oh, how we laughed, every time he said it.

The pinnacle of this individual and collective misplaced ethnocentricity arrived on July 30th 1966. This was the day that verified the truths and worldview that we had been creating for the previous 21 years. This was the day that those glorious boys in red, lay to rest any residual belief that there was anything other than total dominance over the enemy. As Geoff Hurst scored England's fourth goal in the World Cup on Wembley's hallowed turf and the German's were crushed 4-2, we were vindicated. Kenneth Wolsthenholme's immortal words as the pitch was invaded before the final whistle, "they think it's all over -- it is now!" Seemed to completely sum up the misplaced and misconstrued understanding of our European neighbors. We had been misled and deceived by a campaign that Josef Goebbels would have been proud to assign his name to.

However, as with any lie or misrepresentation of the truth, it requires exponentially increasing levels of energy to fuel its fallacy. With an economy that was starting to run down and the European Community starting to benefit from the tidal wave of dollars committed to the rebuilding of Europe under the Marshal plan, we started to get hit more and more with snippets of evidence that maybe we were not as dominant as we thought we might be. A small number of more enlightened individuals who did not subscribe to the simplicity of the victor/loser scenario, took their opportunity to redress the imbalance of mistruths that had painted a distorted picture of Germany and Germans to the British public.

Two such individuals were Arthur Durrant and Phoebe Norris who at Christmas 1946 did the unthinkable of inviting a group of German prisoners from the nearby POW camp (yes there were still prisoners of war interred in the UK 18 months after the end of the war in Europe) into their homes. From this kernel of empathy grew a small low-key activity in my hometown to exchange students in their final years of high school in order to provide cultural interchange.

At the ripe old age of 16 I applied to participate in one such trip. As you can imagine, my parents were horrified. My extended family was convinced that I was in need of long-term psychiatric treatment. Some were convinced that I would never return again and would be immediately be put into a cattle truck and taken to somewhere like Auschwitz or Buchenwald. Me? All I wanted was a good cheap holiday. Furthermore, I was going through a passive-aggressive phase, which made applying for the trip all the more enjoyable. Little did I realize what a seminal event this would be in my life and the catharsis that it brought into both my life and that of my nearest family members.

Meeting real-life Germans, and not those portrayed on TV and cinema screens, was an eye-opener. They turned out to be ordinary human beings, with the same needs and desires as we “Superior Brits” had. Staying in the homes of our German hosts acted to slay the myths that had been spun throughout my lifetime. My peers were hormone driven seeking the same desires in life as we were seeking (mainly getting drunk, and hopefully getting laid). Their parents had the same fears and concerns for their children, as did the parents of our traveling party.

There was, however, one big difference that manifested one rainy afternoon when there were no activities for the exchange group. We were lounging around in the house of the family that I was staying with. The Father of the house, who had less than 10 words of English, was an avid stamp collector. He decided that the best way to pass the downtime would be to show his extensive collection. As we turned the pages, he would give a running commentary on stamps in German, and Klaus, his son and my host, would translate. As you might imagine, it was not the most riveting way to spend a rainy afternoon.

But that changed with the turn of a single page. As we went from a set of innocuous looking postage stamps with pictures of bridges and trains, we turned to a page covered with stamps with Adolf Hitler’s profile on them. Klaus glared at his father and spat a stream of German at him. With the limited language that I had picked up in my German classes, it was obvious that this was a subject that had been raised in the household more than once. The younger generation, were embarrassed to the point of anger to be associated with what they considered to be a stain on their heritage. Klaus later told me that he had often asked his father to remove those pages from the stamp collection, but his father had refused.

Over the next few days, the conversation returned to the stamps and the feelings that our hosts had towards their inglorious recent past history. Surprisingly, there was a sense of strong agreement between both generations about the shame that arose from the fact that as a nation they had participated in such human atrocity. For the younger generation there was also a sense of wonderment as to how nobody in such a cultured and enlightened people had failed to stand against what they knew to be unconscionable. The younger generation had a barely disguised contempt for their elders; the older generation saw this as a cross that they needed to bear for not having stood up and declared that what was happening in their name was unacceptable.

As I returned home, I found that I had a very different worldview. When I met with friends and they started to crack the same old anti-German jokes, not only did I not find them funny, but I started to wonder why I ever found them funny in the first place. My parents were still harboring anger to the fact that I had decided to go and consort with the enemy. Two days later, when the German party came to stay with the Brits for two weeks, my father reluctantly came to meet the coach to pick up Klaus. My mother was shocked, to receive such a well-mannered and polite young man into her home, but it was clear from her body language that she was not going to sleep easily while he was under her roof. In retrospect, I guess it was too much to imagine meeting one German in the flesh to erase the memories of the Blitz overnight.

But as I was to find out later in life, the universe has her way of achieving radical transformation. About midway through the German party's stay, it happened to be my 17th birthday. I was at an age, where birthdays were no longer of major significance, and decided not to do anything special to celebrate the event. However, some of the members of the party, English and German, decided otherwise, and we ended up with 40 teenagers arriving at my door carrying food and drink, little of which was not alcoholic. My parents sensed that retreat was probably the better part of valor made alternative plans for the evening, and allowed my impromptu birthday party to take place.

When they returned after their evening out, what amazed them most was not that we had not been dragged off by the local constabulary, but the fact that the house was cleaner than when they had left early in the evening. Nobody, had embarrassed themselves by getting too drunk, and about half the party was still at the house drinking coffee, sobering up and engaging in meaningful conversation about life, the universe and everything.

Although they could not bring themselves to reflect the change that had occurred in their perception of the German people, it became obvious over the coming months that a deep-rooted transformation had taken place. Initially, it came from not participating in the traditional "German bashing" whenever they met with family and friends. Subtly, over time, this went from remaining silent to challenging some of the more outrageous statements that others were saying. Eventually, my parents' circle of friends changed quite radically, and no longer included those who insisted on the veracity of the myths about Germany as a whole.

Over the years, it has been my honor and privilege to work with many Germans that I have had the opportunity to call friends. More importantly, as I have taken the time to seek out and understand the gifts that Germany has given to world culture, particularly, I believe that the impact that Germany has had not only on my individual psyche but also on our collective psyche should not be underestimated. As seekers of truth, especially from an integral perspective, understanding the nature and impact of German influence needs to form part of every persons Integral Life Practice, to do otherwise is to remain in denial and leave fertile grounds for one's shadow to play and run amok.

With this issue with ILR, I believe that we are attempting to expose yet another 800lb gorilla, and that has been sitting in our midst for the past 70 years. If we desire to be truly world-centric leaders in the 21st century, then facing up to our own Germany is just one step on the way to enlightened integral leadership. Documenting our own odyssey with its German influence holds up a mirror to who we truly are, and who we have the potential to become. I am not suggesting that it is necessarily an easy process, but I do believe that it is one that has the potential to bring many benefits and thoroughly recommend it.

About the Author

Keith Bellamy is a member of the Management Review Board of Integral Leadership Review, COO of Integral Publishers and an international consultant. This column is a regular feature of *Integral Leadership Review*.