By Phil Kruger

Recent trip to Hannover and Germany

I am of the generation of Jews who would not buy a Volkswagen vehicle even if we admired the value, efficiency and engineering of the car. We just did not buy German products even if we did not lose close relatives in the Shoah. Nevertheless, Judy and I ardently believe in the lasting and important value of interfaith dialogue. So we quickly volunteered to be a host family a year ago last spring when it was announced that over 20 Lutherans from Hannover, Germany, were coming to the Caldwells and New York to learn firsthand about American Judaism and to engage in interfaith dialogue with the CAI community. We were fortunate to house four wonderful individuals and participated in enlightening conversations with them about why they had decided to come to Caldwell on a trip led by Professor Ursula Rudnick, a German Lutheran minister and educator trained at JTS and a friend of our own Debby Miller. The Germans’ trip to the Caldwells proved to be a very pleasant experience for all involved.  And after their visit, they moved on.  And that seemed to be the end of it.

Until our CAI interfaith committee chairperson, Glen Sacks, together with Professor Rudnick, began to champion a return trip to Hannover, Germany. Frankly, a trip to Germany was not on either Judy’s or my bucket list. I still had in the back of my mind the verse from parshah Should we go to Germany and ignore the precept that  ‘Hashem maintains a war with Amalek [a nation that has been used by commentators as the embodiment of evil and which has been viewed by some modern commentators as having been embodied by Nazi Germany], from generation to generation”? And yet our friends from Germany came here to meet American Jews to make friends with them and to learn about modern American Judaism and in some ways how it has been affected by the Holocaust. Could we refuse their invitation? We decided to go and planned a Jewish trip around a visit to Hannover.

As it turns out, the trip was one of the most enlightening adventures of our lives. We stayed at the home of one of our own guests, Ingrid Goes, who, with her husband Christoph, made us feel incredibly welcome. Professor Rudnick had planned a fabulous two-day itinerary in Hannover that would challenge our stamina, taking us to the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp, to a surviving pre-war synagogue in Celle, Germany, and to two modern synagogues and a pre-war cemetery in Hannover. Each day was capped off with a very special communal vegetarian group dinner. Ursula’s attention to detail was remarkable and the once-in-a-lifetime adventure gave us an unexpected chance not only to take our own pulse regarding the limits of forgiveness, repentance and guilt, but also that of the Germans who had befriended us. Every day Germans born in the 70s, 80s and 90s walk the streets of their cities, constantly reminded of the evil that had taken place there by the stumble stones at their feet (small memorials to individual people who had lived right there in the 30s but had been deported and murdered during the war). These and the often constant memorials to the Shoah all around them had me wondering how Americans would feel if we were constantly reminded of our own failures regarding slavery, native Americans and the Japanese internment camps. I came to understand, through my discussions with Ursula and others, the important, but subtle, differences between guilt and shame and between forgetting and forgiving. We made close and what we hope will be lasting friendships with the group of dear Germans who treated us so kindly.

In addition to Hannover, we visited Berlin Koln, the three medieval cities of Mainz, Worms and Speyer (great cities of Jewish antiquity where Rashi studied and prayed) and finally Frankfurt. We made it a point to seek out whatever might be Jewish in all of those locales, from the Chagall windows in the choir section of the St. Stephan’s church in Mainz to the mikvah of the demolished Jewish synagogue in Speyer. When the foundations of the 1,000-year-old *Judenstrasse* (Jewish street) were discovered in Frankfurt during an excavation, it was Germans, not Jews, who protested the planned destruction of the excavation and insisted on the construction of a museum.

Earlier I described this as a once-in-a- lifetime adventure of interfaith learning, but Ursula already has plans to prove me wrong with an interfaith trip to London. Stay tuned.

ashem, your God  --  a jealous God, Who visits the sin