



HOME AGAIN IN GRUNEWALD  
NORMAN BIRNBAUM

---

Norman Birnbaum is an American sociologist. He is an emeritus professor at the Georgetown University Law Center and a member of the editorial board of *The Nation*. – Address: 2815 Bellevue Terrace NW, Washington DC 20007, USA.  
E-Mail: [red21@starpower.net](mailto:red21@starpower.net)

The three months I spent as Guest at the Wissenschaftskolleg – January, February, March – were not my first ones in its emphatically hospitable surroundings. In the calendar year 1986, I was a Guest Scholar at the Wissenschaftszentrum für Sozialforschung, but also a Guest at the Kolleg. I lived there for a while, subsequently moved to an apartment in Schöneberg, but participated rather fully in the life of the place. In 2008, I had the advantage of an apartment in Villa Walther – one on the fourth floor in the part of the building without a lift, to the considerable approval of my cardiologist. I suppose that there is a symbolic connection between my daily pre-Alpine ascents and my general enjoyment of the visit, to be summarized in the American phrase, “there is life in the old boy yet.” Certainly (I was born in 1926) I found the experience an interesting mixture of the renewal of old attachments and contact with a Germany strikingly different from the one I first visited as a student in 1952.

The project that brought me to Berlin is a memoir of a life spent exploring a variety of worlds. I was born into the Eastern European Jewish immigration in New York. My grandfather had served His Imperial Highness the Tsar in the Russian army, then left his native Radom, Poland for our city, then as now a great portal to our nation’s promises for newcomers. My father was a schoolteacher and administrator, and I had the good fortune

to grow up in a house with books and a nervous awareness of the nineteen-thirties – great years in the United States of Franklin Roosevelt, but clouded by Europe’s preparations for war, and its actual descent into disaster. I absorbed that optimistic progressivism that was the ethos of the New Deal, of course learned of the warring Marxist eschatologies of Stalin and Trotsky, recollect to this day the pitched whine of Hitler’s voice on the radio, and remember the young men who returned after defending the Spanish Republic in the Abraham Lincoln Brigade.

It was a febrile milieu, and the journalists, scientists, scholars, and writers who emerged from it know their debts to it. We were, however, impelled to move on, and move on we did.

I came to know the intellectuals who wrote for the New Deal weekly, *The Nation*, and the modernist quarterly, *Partisan Review*. At sixteen, I went to New England for my college education, at Williams – a college definitely belonging to a much earlier set of immigrants. My college years were interrupted by a return to New York during the war, when I worked for the US propaganda agency, the Office of War Information, and came to know Americans from every part of the country.

When I graduated from Williams in 1947 I moved to Harvard in quest of a doctorate in sociology. My studies in social science were disappointing. I did not believe in the development of a “science” of society on the model of the natural sciences; our teachers somehow regarded matters of class, gender, and race as off limits; and their contribution to the intellectual life of the university was to invent circumlocutions for the assertions that the US was a consensual society (in the epoch of the great persecutor, Senator McCarthy) and that we were in the vanguard of the historical process of “modernization” that would sooner rather than later alter every society on earth.

These were imperial illusions about which I had imperfectly articulated, but profound, doubts. The doubts came not only from American radicalism but also from reading decidedly non-radical Europeans. American Progressivism was a noble but localized world view, and I gradually experienced the need to develop another one. I was helped by joining the mainstream of Harvard life, living in a residential unit of the college as a tutor, and teaching in the General Education program. I also became friendly with Carl Kaysen and Arthur Schlesinger Jr., who later went to the Kennedy White House, with Henry Kissinger who went to Nixon’s, and with H. Stuart Hughes and Morton White, who kept their distance from the prevailing complacency.

My own way out of thinking conventionally was to examine a phenomenon outside our own historical experience. The US is a Protestant nation, its spiritual roots lie in the Reformation – but so do those of many other histories, including modern Germany’s.

Encouraged by my teacher Talcott Parsons, I found in Troeltsch and Weber some of the answers to a question that had perplexed me since boyhood: why Nazism? The Heidelberg friends suggested that the Lutheran doctrine of the two realms was at the basis of German political quietism – but what underlay, social-historically, the German Reformation itself? I decided to write a thesis on the Reformation in the German cities, following Weber’s suggestion that inquiries of this sort were needed to complement his work on the social psychological consequences of doctrine.

I came to Germany in 1952 devoid of direct contact with German culture and history – even if of course I had met older and younger refugees from Nazism, Jewish and Gentile, and some post-1945 visitors to Harvard. My first year in Germany, 1952–53, was spent moving through doors half open, half shut – into the half lights of the German experience. Years later, when I went to teach at Oxford, I had the impression of turning the pages of a novel about the university. In my first year in Germany, I frequently felt as if I had stepped into a film – or rather, that I spent entire days at the movies, alternating vertiginously between the Expressionism of the twenties and the sobriety of the late forties. I did some work in Church history and theology, but I concentrated on experiencing the history of Germany, live.

I did not return to the US after the end of the academic year, but moved to the United Kingdom, where I taught for eleven years, followed by another two as a visiting professor at the University of Strasbourg. I had met my future wife at Marburg, we had children in England who grew up bilingually, and we went often to Germany. I knew not only figures like Abendroth and Kogon, Habermas and Hennis, and of course the Frankfurt School patriarchs Adorno and Horkheimer, but also a very varied cast of characters, including Schelsky, the Confessional Church theologians, and persons in the Group 47. I also, occasionally, visited the German Democratic Republic, from which I was barred in 1986 until the changes of 1989: I had been friendly with the dissidents who later constituted the Neues Forum.

Upon my return to the US in 1966, my contacts with Germany, if anything, intensified.

In the period of the student movement, I was one of its American interlocutors. My return to the US brought a three-fold re-integration – in academic life, with chairs at Amherst College and later Georgetown; in intellectual life, with membership in the editorial

boards of *Partisan Review* and *The Nation*; and in politics, where I worked with the United Auto Workers and figures like Senator Edward Kennedy. I came to know Willy Brandt and his circle (Horst Ehmke and Erhard Eppler) quite well. In the period of the German peace movement, the campaign against the stationing of the Euro-missiles in Germany, my house in Washington was a plaque tournant for it.

During my residence in 1986, I drew upon all of these experiences to write a book on American political and social thought, *The Radical Renewal: The Politics Of Ideas In Modern America* (Pantheon, 1988). In 2008, I came to continue the difficult process of settling my spiritual accounts – to work on a memoir. Obviously, Germany had changed in a half-century full of larger historical events: but which changes were salient and which ones carried portents of the future? When in February I presented my thoughts on coming to Germany in 1952, my colleagues posed questions so acute that, afterward, I could have drawn up a list of alternative answers to each of them. I profited from their interest. I was, indeed, talking about the Germany of their parents and grandparents – and however refined the questions of their children and grandchildren, they refracted the historical experience of several generations in ways I found immensely instructive.

Writing a memoir is anything but an experience with the linear properties of narrative. It is an inquiry into the meaning (rather, meanings) of the past – for the sake of making sense of the present. Personal insufficiencies, errors of professional and political judgment, injustices too often committed as well as occasionally suffered, combine to bring life to a specter: what might have been. Still, one has to live with the consequences of what actually happened, however tortuous the line between past and present. The responses of my colleagues to my recollections were decidedly therapeutic: they found these worth listening to.

That in itself was a major inspiration to persist. I thank the Wissenschaftskolleg and the Fellows for a splendid visit.