

I was born and grew up in a small village: six houses and a pub. My parents had a small farm. It was my mother's second marriage, her first husband fell during the war. My father married her after the war and I was born in 1948 as the third of six children. My father was originally from Siebenbürgen¹ and the connection to Romania was something special to me as a child. My grandfather's letters began with "My darlings far away" - for me as a child, Siebenbürgen was a place where people who were intimately connected with us, but unreachable. After my *Abitur* (university entrance examination) in 1967, I travelled to Romania for the first time and got to know my father's family.

My parents, especially my mother, were anchored in the protestant community and our family life was influenced by Christianity. We prayed at the table in the mornings and evenings, we went to church and were in contact with the priests and their families. During the Nazi era, the grandfather kept his distance with the *Deutschen Christen*² and indirectly managed to get copies of pastor Niemöller's³ sermons. Niemöller represented the opposite position of the *Bekennenden Kirche*⁴. An aunt who was a deaconess, sympathised with the *Deutschen Christen*. The question of how to position oneself as a Christian in Hitler's Germany was a conflict-ridden topic in the family during the Nazi era.

We children went to Sunday school. In the winter, missionaries came from Neuendettelsau with illustrated lectures from all around the world - and at eight years old I was certain that I wanted to be a missionary. The "distant horizon" was very appealing to me - but also the fact that these missionaries worked hands-on and didn't just stand on the pulpit. I liked that. We didn't have a radio and television at home. The library at the rectory was an important place for me, I got through the children's books relatively quickly and was soon allowed into the adult library. Because I was so young, I suppose that I read quite a few books that I barely understood. I remember a book that I read at about twelve, thirteen years old about Höß⁵, the commandant of Auschwitz, and that was just too early.

As school pupils, we asked the question: "National Socialism, what was it?" It was only dealt with a little in lessons and there were hardly any discussions. It was later found out that the Nazi era had made a heavy impact on our history teacher, so he would read a sentence from the history book at his desk, then come around the desk and repeat it out loud. Then he would read through another sentence and read it out loud and so on... presumably just so as not to do any thing wrong...

After my *Abitur*, I began studying theology in Neuendettelsau⁶. From the student movement we had a study group "Christian-Marxist dialogue," where mainly these

¹ The *Siebenbürger Saxons* are a German speaking minority in today's Romania.
<http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Siebenbürgen>

² The *Deutschen Christen* (DC) [German Christians] were a racist, anti-Semitic trend in German Protestantism that was orientated towards the *Führer* principle. From 1932 to 1945, they wanted to match National Socialism.
http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Deutsche_Christen

³ *Martin Niemöller* (1892-1984) was a German theologian and leading representative of the Confessing Church as well as the president in the church's ecumenical council. He originally had a positive opinion of National Socialism, in the struggle between church and state and after being a prisoner at the Sachsenhausen concentration camp in 1937, he gradually developed into a resistance fighter against National Socialism. After 1945 he was committed to reorganizing the protestant church and became visible in the peace movement.

⁴ The *Bekennende Kirche* (BK) [Confessing Church] was an opposition movement against the enforced conformity of the *Deutschen Evangelischen Kirche* (DEK) [German Protestant Church's] teachings and organization during the Nazi era, for example through the *Deutschen Christen*, state-backed church committees and partially direct state commissioners.
http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bekennende_Kirche

⁵ *Rudolf Höß*, Commandant of the Auschwitz concentration camp http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rudolf_Höß

theologians and Marxists from Prague were read, such as Josef Hromádka⁷. At the university, you could communicate with the three houses where the students lived from the reception area. Whoever was on duty would either give the Bible slogan of the day in the morning or a saying of Mao Tse-tung's. So you always knew from the students which group was on reception duty. I can still remember it well, when the news came that the Prague Spring⁸ had been crushed. It was a setback. Yes, that's what it was after this spirit of optimism.

After two semesters, I changed from Neuendettelsau to Mainz. The theological faculty was very politically active there and I got involved with a social pedagogic working group. At the time in Mainz where the ZDF resided, there was a "*Mau-Mau-Siedlung*"⁹, it was a shanty town where destitute families were sheltered. There we gave the children extra lessons once or twice per week. For us, political work meant putting our convictions into concrete actions.

Then I went to Berlin, there were contacts in Berlin through these socio-political working groups. I did my exams relatively quickly in 1972. We were a group of four theology students and we weren't sure at all if we wanted to go into the ministry, into the parish. We went on the idea that the parishes were things that had actually outlived their usefulness. And we wanted to see for ourselves how it was... Therefore, we took our exams, then the four of us went into a "group Vicariate", which at that time was something new.

The four of us worked here in Kreuzberg, in directly adjoining parishes and we met up with our mentors once a week. That was quite intensive dispute for us and also for the mentors. We met the community with a lot of scepticism. And that's why the four of us were trying to prevent, as we said, being devoured by the community. At that time began the urban redevelopment in Kreuzberg, and this part of Kreuzberg was simply a written-off area. Therefore, community work was a very important topic for us. This was a time when the last paediatrician moved from the area. There were no more paediatricians, but plenty of children. We then started an initiative *Kinderärzte für Kreuzberg*, collected signatures and even the television cameras came along to report on the initiative.

For all the scepticism – we didn't see an alternative to community work at the time, apart from maybe working in political parties where we were also sceptical of the founding of parties. Back then there was a range of leftist parties to choose from, the KPD / AO¹⁰, SEW¹¹, anything with a 'K'¹². But I couldn't really identify with any of the groups. Therefore, I was always a bit distanced. The question of God, the question of the Bible, of the force that might lie behind, above, below, the whole world was all a bit suspect for us back then. We wanted to try to explain everything rationally with social developments, and therefore also studied Engels and Marx's economy within this practical education. Parallel to theology, I also then studied social pedagogy in order to

⁶ Augustana Hochschule Neuendettelsau – Church University

⁷ Josef Hromádka was a significant theological interpreter of Marxism, socialism and communism.
http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Josef_Hrom%C3%A1dka

⁸ http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Prager_Fr%C3%BChling

⁹ <http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mau-Mau-Siedlung>

¹⁰ *Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands - Aufbauorganisation*

¹¹ *Sozialistische Einheitspartei Westberlins*

¹² The letter 'K' refers to the German for 'Communism' - *Der Kommunismus*,

have an alternative to being a pastor. I also passed social pedagogy and spent a while working with “lower classes” – a low-threshold service for people in housing estates, at the time that was a pilot project.

Church services for us were first off mainly with older people, senior citizens, which would eventually peter out. Where back then significantly more people still came to worship than today. Over time we then realized that the contact between ourselves and the people in the parish changed us a bit. Or... Changed us quite a lot. I like listening to people, I am interested by life stories and I want to understand something from them, no matter how “strange” they are. These encounters with the people in our parishes have changed us all, I think. All four of us have become parish priests.

After the RAF's¹³ attacks in the 70s, the climate changed in West Berlin. All of a sudden there were a lot of police raids, traffic checks and so on. I had a friend who was also vicar, who at one point was brought in front of the Frankfurt State Security Court on trial, because he'd once let Ulrike Meinhof¹⁴ stay overnight in Marburg. I accompanied him to Frankfurt and gave a little testimony about his character. Drenkmann¹⁵, the presiding judge of the Court of Appeal was murdered here in Berlin. And Bishop Scharf¹⁶, in the mean time visited the arrested RAF members who sat in prison here in Berlin upon their wishes. He was then butchered by the Springer press and decried as: "Bishop of the Terrorists". At Drenkmann's funeral, which of course Scharf attended, there's a photo where he stands so isolated in society. Scharf was an important person for us and also for me, and especially important were the parishes where people felt a bit more responsible for the community. The first question wasn't "are you baptised?" Instead they asked who lives here, what conflicts are there, what problems are there here? They even asked questions about the Turkish neighbours who by now at least had children in the day care centres here in Kreuzberg. There were quite a lot of different stimuli and things changed a bit. At the time, that was a break through in the seventies, even here in the church parishes. We tried a political theology, I think about what Gollwitzer said: "A Christian must be socialist." What we tried, in sermons, discussions or group projects, it was all done along these lines.

Back then, the cold war had a significant presence between the East and West, and we priests wanted to bring this so called “anti-communism” into question a bit. I never thought the GDR was the Promised Land. But for us at any rate, it presented an attempt at another model of living following the Nazi period. At the least in the state apparatus of the GDR's government there weren't any ex-Nazis. By contrast in West Germany during the 60s, there wasn't hardly a single department head in the ministries that hadn't been a member of the NSDAP. In my opinion, everything carried on seamlessly in the West after the war.

The members of the senior citizen's groups in our parish had had their own experiences of National Socialism, communism, who had many relatives in the GDR and such. So always a tricky question or theory to throw out there was: Who is eligible to be elected?

¹³ The *Rote Armee Fraktion* [Red Army Fraction] (RAF) was an extreme-leftist terrorist organisation in the Federal Republic of Germany. It was responsible for 34 murders, several kidnappings and many bank robberies and attacks with explosives that left many wounded and caused significant damage. It was founded in 1970 by Andras Baader, Gudrun Ensslin, Horst Mahler, Ulrike Meinhof among others. http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rote_Armee_Fraktion

¹⁴ *Ulrike Marie Meinhof* (1934-1976) was a German journalist and publicist that become in the West German student movement of the 1960s and later became radicalised as a terrorist. She was a founder and leader of the Red Army Fraction (RAF) that was founded in 1970, the ideology of which she played a significant role in developing. http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ulrike_Meinhof

¹⁵ http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/G%C3%BCnter_von_Drenkmann

¹⁶ http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kurt_Scharf

Everybody is eligible who stands for election according to the German Basic Law! And the SEW is not immediately something that comes "the devil". "Church and socialism" then became a group with us that had established itself. There was also "Responsible Churches", KiV here in Berlin where younger priests tried to express church politics together with older ones, to have some influence. That meant: not only thinking from a revolutionary standpoint and that everything has to be from the bottom up, but also questions like "what structures are there already?" "Where can I change something?" "What can be done?" On the one hand you could try to influence the Synod¹⁷, or on the other hand you could try to bring out the main points in the communities.

I began working in the parish of St. Thomas here in Kreuzberg at the beginning of 1987, and on the 1 May¹⁸ there were these violent disputes where *Bolle*¹⁹ was burned down. Suddenly, as a priest – I'd hardly been here for half a year – I was summoned by Ulf Fink²⁰, he was the senator of Berlin at the time. Fink wanted to talk to me about what had happened and what was wrong here with us... So on the one side I was having discussions with the senator, and on the other side I was in contact with squatters. There were always squatters, and the priests were the ones who tried to mediate between the different parties. We had discussions after almost every church service, right here in the church with 30, 40 people and then resolutions were either adopted or drafted. Then the Thomas parish founded Stadtbau-GmbH which looked after the occupied houses so that they could be modernized in self-help projects. We then opened Café Krause in 1987 for the people who didn't have any work and often didn't have homes either. Here, the poverty in the parish became clear. Via our welfare and social work, we offered food at Café Krause and had a big intake. It was clear that we needed to keep this place open.

Before the fall of the Berlin Wall, the parish of St. Thomas was a kind of experimental community, a special case in West Berlin's church landscape. The church was right at the edge of Kreuzberg, right on the final corner of West-Berlin directly on the wall. Only the people who really wanted to come here came. St. Thomas was politically and social-politically, one of the most active parishes that was also connected with house squatters and social projects. Because of this, people came to us from other parts of the city along with many students too. After the fall of the Wall, St. Thomas became more and more of a "normal" parish. Café Krause has survived all of these years and is still organized and run by people from the parish.

The question, "what has to be changed?" I don't think it has ever been answered. It has to be asked again and again and new answers need to be found. At the time we thought, we have the right consciousness and we'll change anything – only to come to understand over time, that the question of change is much older than we are. And other people have good ideas too and they make achievements in certain fields which we simply overlooked. This idea of: I'm the centre of the universe, I've got everything under control and I'm the one that shapes it – little by little, this idea melted away. Rather, a trust developed that sometimes people start something that someone completely different may or may not continue. We all contribute a little bit to a sort of patchwork rug,

¹⁷ In the German protestant church, the Synod parliament is the church's self-government. http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Synode_%28evangelische_Kirchen%29

¹⁸ http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Erster_Mai_in_Kreuzberg

¹⁹ A supermarket in Kreuzberg that was burned down on 1 May 1987 during riots.

²⁰ http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ulf_Fink

where an entire rug is made from a lot of individual patches, and then that makes a difference... And then you can bring God back into the discussion.