

## **A Little Town in Germany**

A couple of anecdotes adapted from a letter to my family in 2002:

For vacation in 2002 we drove from Italy to Scandinavia, passing through Germany. On the way we spent one night at about the halfway point, off the E45 in a guesthouse in a village I'll call Ostenwald in northwestern Germany. (It lies north of Hannover and, by sheer chance, not far west of Bergen, which was once the site of the noted concentration camp Bergen-Belsen).

In the dining room of the gasthaus, with hunting trophies all over the walls (the cheerful kind, with animal heads), we noticed, among a collection on a shelf of army memorabilia (unit badges and spent ammo casings), a menorah. It seemed somehow out of place here.

Curious, I managed to ask (with my very rusty German) about the menorah, calling it by name. The owner, a friendly sort of guy in his thirties, happily started to explain that it was a Jewish thing for Hanukkah, and how it was used. But I said right away that I knew very well what a menorah is – in fact, my wife and her son are Jewish – I was just curious to know how they happened to have one; by chance was there anybody Jewish in the family?

The answer to this was No, nobody Jewish in the family, and that they'd gotten the thing from – an antique dealer. At that point, obviously sensitive to the implications of this, at least in the presence of a couple of Jewish people, he was overcome with shame. For our part, we were embarrassed. I really wasn't trying at all to put the screws on him. (Ironically, this was all after eating a tasty and robust German dinner with noodles and plenty of pork.)

After dinner we took a walk in this little hamlet (you can imagine we wanted a little fresh air) with farms on the outskirts, and on a house in an unfenced yard I saw a small sign, basically a "beware of dog" sign. I peered more closely, and was able to make out the German. Essentially it said, "Unchained dog on the premises, trained to attack. If he comes, flatten yourself on the ground, face down, cover your neck with your hands, and call for help. Good Luck." We did not run, but we walked away fast; we never saw any dog – maybe there never was one. Love that German sense of humor.

It was also in this town, when we were leaving in the morning, that we saw the "tank crossing" sign (see the photo below – there's some sort of NATO installation close by). That was the funniest thing. Or at least by then we needed a good laugh.

Allen Schill  
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P.S.: In preparing this piece, I almost left the actual name of the town, but finally disguised it out of deference to the good and decent people who live there, whom I don't wish to embarrass. (I've seen their website, and these people seem perfectly normal and charming folks.) I admit I'm making fun of small-town life, and maybe that's cheap. But the story of the menorah is no joke. Certainly all over Germany there must be many millions of stories as shameful as this one (and worse), and that's the trouble. (And in many other countries as well, to be told by people just like you and me. It's what Hannah Arendt's idea of the banality of evil is all about.) My host at least had the decency to be ashamed, even if the menorah came into the possession of his family before he was even born, as is most likely the case. I've met a few who wouldn't have been ashamed.