

Words between Worlds:



source: BBC; 10 January 2015 demo in Dresden for "cultural openness, humanity and dialogue"

*Intercultural and
Intergenerational
Reflection on
Family,
Foreigners and
the Future*

A Project that Creates Space for Encounters and Exchange between Germans and Non-Germans

Introduction:

Saxony generally, but Dresden specifically, faces a considerable challenge at present:

few non-Germans live here. At least so it seems, as many people in the region don't personally know any foreigners, yet fear or disdain them. And, fear breeds conflict.

Spuren e.V. has three solutions: an Israeli Jew, a Mideast Muslim and a Midwest Quaker.

Michael Luick-Thrams, Sagy Cohen and a Muslim guest offer the workshop *Words between Worlds*, which brings young people and their families into direct contact with foreigners living in Germany.

Words between Worlds help schools, churches, civic clubs or other public bodies create a relaxed, non-polemical space where encounters between individuals of different cultures and generations can take place that result in deep, genuine, open exchange. As experienced educators, Michael and Sagy well know that effective learning takes place over time, in varied forms that touch both learners' heads and hearts, in conjunction with people with whom the pupils have primary relationships: What good does it do for pupils to hear about diversity and tolerance at school, but then go home and be served a soup of prejudiced group think and resentment? Lasting change cannot succeed in isolation.

And, they know that hate is learned at a young age—as is tolerance. The underlying xenophobia too common in Saxony isn't the fault of the region's young people: They are only sponges and mirrors of the adults and culture around them. Pupils didn't create the problem, but one thing is certain: Either they will carry on fear-fed intolerance into the next generation *or* they will confront and end it. If they are to succeed, however, they need to identify xenophobia's roots in their own families and work together to change local narratives that have led to the current social and political climate.

We can help.

Spuren offers workshops for pupils and their teachers ranging from a one-time 90-minute core presentation to weekend retreats, as well as downloadable pre- and post-visit learning materials, extended contact (“reunions”) over time, etc. Grand-/parents are warmly invited to participate, too.

Project Outline: What

Words between Worlds focuses not on the abstract or political but on the immediate and personal. Its co-facilitators believe that while we all live in a neighborhood, each of us first lives in a house: To make conscious our belief-driven behaviors, then confront and finally change them, we best begin at home. Thus, participants are invited to examine their origins and lives, and those of their families.

Words between Worlds provides a relaxed environment where 9th- to 12th-grade pupils can review from where they and their families have come, consider their lives today and envision who they might yet become both as individuals and as members of larger groups—familial, civic or otherwise.

They do this in tandem with three non-Germans living among them who share a nation all now call “home,” in the heart of a fast-changing Europe. In learning who these foreigners are, a bit about the cultures they come from, why they choose daily to live in Germany and their hopes for the future, the pupils and their families are offered a mirror through which to address such questions, too.

Words between Worlds can be tailored to fit each host’s needs, conditions and resources. A visit to a school can take place as a one-time 90-minute assembly, or as half-, full-day or weekend workshops. Depending on the audience, its main working languages can be German or English. Hosts pick from:

Round 1: the Core Presentation

(**length:** 90 minutes minimum; **format:** Power-Point-illustrated presentations by guest speakers)

Using Power-Point-projected images of their own families or native countries, three foreigners take turns addressing three themes for pupils and teachers as a large-group gathering (e.g. an assembly):

- **Where are we from?** What have been some defining experiences in our and our family’s lives? How are we similar or different from other people belonging to the same groups (ethnic, religious, political or other) with whom feel connected? What makes us “Me”?
- **Why are we here?** What brought us to live in Germany, in Saxony or specifically in Dresden?
- **What do we want?** How would we like our life and our (adopted) city to be in the future?

Host institutions can choose any, even all of the following additional rounds to deepen the pupils’ experience of the above core presentation. Each round greatly increases the project’s effectiveness.

Round 2: Pupils’ Own Questions

(**length:** 45-90 minutes; **format:** Q-A session, focused on exchange between pupils and presenters)

Directly following the core presentation, the three foreigners split up and each takes turns answering questions from pupils in small-group settings. *Emphasis:* Pre-visit preparation by teachers is helpful.

Round 3: Pupils’ Own Stories

(**length:** 45-90 minutes; **format:** discussion based on pupils’ input)

Still split between three small-group bodies, the three foreigners take turns listening to pupils’ answers to the above questions. *Emphasis:* exchange between guests and pupils with other pupils.

An added dimension consists of inviting pupils' grandparents to attend some of the workshop's rounds. Spuren can supply hosts with downloadable templates to facilitate including families.

Round 4: Pupils' Grandparents' Stories

(**length:** 45-90 minutes; **format:** discussion between pupils, family and other pupils about grandparents' input)

The process now unfolding in Saxony hasn't arrived from nowhere, overnight; rather, age-old, latent dynamics that have been passed between generations for a long time are surfacing, begging to be addressed. For that reason, we ask schools to invite grandparents and, if possible—even if after work hours—parents, to attend these rounds. Pre-visit or post-visit engagement with families enriches the overall experience further; Spuren can assist schools in setting into motion involving families in this project. Above all, family members are invited to share from their own experiences and perspectives; through this exchange, we build bridges between generations, cultures and individual biographies.

The three foreigners and pupils—now joined by grandparents—listen to the elders' reflections on the following questions or others:

- **Where is your family from?** What have been some defining experiences in your family's lives (political events, wars, family tragedies or successes)? What makes your family "unique"?
- **Why are you here?** What do you like about living in Saxony or specifically in Dresden?
- **What do you want?** How would you like your life and your city to be in the future?

The workshop's value reaches yet another level of impact when pupils' parents also attend some rounds. Spuren can advise hosts how to more effectively integrate families into the overall project.

Round 5: Pupils' Parents' Stories

(**length:** 45-90 minutes; **format:** discussion between pupils, family and other pupils about parents' input)

The foreign presenters, pupils and grandparents—now joined by parents—listen to the parents' reflections on the following questions or others:

- **Where does your family live?** What have been defining experiences in Saxony's or Dresden's past that makes this state or city "unique"? How is this region different from others?
- **How would you change your "homeland?"** What do you like less about Saxony or Dresden?
- **What do you want to preserve or expand?** How would you like your city to be in the future?

Emphasis: direct exchange between pupils and their families, observed or moderated by guests.

Extended Workshop Offerings

(**length:** varied; **formats:** discussions, roll playing, films and multi-media, other)

The same themes, questions and discussions can be productively, peaceably deepened "overnight," with a follow-up session the next morning; *or*, they can be spread over a weekend (Fri. eve to Sun. afternoon)—a format well-suited to private schools, churches, civic groups or other such institutions.

Such in-depth exploration of the workshop's main themes is most successful when involving family members. The pupils should be chosen, however, based on each one's level of maturity and interest.

Complementary Parallel Projects

Depending on how in-depth the school wishes to explore the topic, pre-visit essays written in (for example) English, German or ethics classes about pupils' own lives or families help pupils integrate more fully the overall experience, for a longer time—as can post-visit essays. By longer engagements pupils, staff or family members can film parts of presentations for later review. Also, pupils from the Czech Republic, Poland or other German regions can be invited to participate to expand perspectives.

Regardless of how long the *Words between Worlds* team engages a host organization's members, the participants review their individual and familial resumes, then share from those biographies—in a longer engagement, with photos, maps, etc. They also can share their questions or ideas in small- and large-group work, which includes the exchange of experiences, fears, hopes and dreams.

At the end of multiple rounds, each participant shares how she or he intends to carry new awarenesses home, then integrate them into daily life. Participants who wish may stay in contact, post-workshop, in order to support each other: periodic “reunions” facilitate continued learning.

Project Outline: How

This program avoids theology, partisan politics or missionary efforts. Instead, the pupils examine topics more from personal, social, historical points of view—above all, as individuals belonging to families, school bodies, national cultures, and a generation maturing in a time of global transition.

Words between Worlds co-facilitators, Sagy Cohen and Michael Luick-Thrams, work in tandem with Spuren e.V. Its workshops and projects focus on stories, on narrative social history, on three levels:

- **Stories of humanity:** What does it mean to be a human? How have humans lived in various eras or cultures—and, what does that variety of human experience say to us alive today (and those to follow us) about how best to live; what lessons can we draw from our shared pasts?
- **Stories of groups:** How did we get to be “us” till this point? How did past shared experiences form our collective character or inform our current ways of living and organizing society?
- **Stories of individuals:** What in a given human life is the result of nature and what born of nurture? What parts of “me” are innate and which ones are absorbed from those around us?

Project Outline: Why

Spuren executive director, Michael Luick-Thrams, brings forty years of genealogical, historical and pedagogical experience with him. As a great-grandson of a one-time Ku Klux Klan member, he seeks to understand group behavior and the seeds of conflict by examining their roots in individual lives. Holding a doctorate in Modern European History from Humboldt Universität zu Berlin, he facilitates family and individual history research in the context of social history. (See www.roots.TRACES.org.) As he has done with his own family, Dr. Luick-Thrams invites project participants, as they prepare to share their family's stories, to consider the effects on their families and themselves of:

- **migration:** How has moving from one culture to another or between different regions within a country changed our families? What's been gained through that process; what's been lost?
- **work and leisure:** What goods or services have our families provided others in order to fund our livelihoods? Outside work, what roles have entertainment, music and art, sports, travel, hobbies, civic engagement or voluntary pastimes played in our families or individual lives?
- **economic cycles:** How have our families responded to and been shaped by booms or busts? How have wealth, poverty, job loss, further education or career shifts changed our lives?

- **climate and natural disasters:** How have climatic conditions dictated our ways of living, or freak-occurrence weather events visited our lives for a moment, but with long-term effects?
- **wars:** How has the experience of war changed our family members' personalities, our familial fates and our nation? How have we, through war, affected the lives or fates of others?
- **religion:** How has religious belief or spirituality shaped our familial culture or community?
- **technology:** How have technological developments altered the ways we live, think or relate?
- **intimate relations:** What have been lasting legacies of unplanned pregnancies, marriage, divorce, patchwork parenting, non-traditional lifestyles, aging and death in our families?

We explore these and other questions together to better understand ourselves and each other. In the process, we seek to alter the stories we've told about ourselves and our nations, to adjust them to the realities of others who we did not before know or understand. Through sharing, we flourish.

Project Outline: Who



Sagy Cohen is an Israeli author who immigrated to Germany eight years ago. As a grandson of Auschwitz survivors, the decision to live in the heart of the Holocaust forced him to confront his own fears and prejudices. It changed his life and belief systems, and led him to reinvent himself. Today, he works with Germans and other Central Europeans of all kinds and ages, also sharing his life stories.



Michael Luick-Thrams grew up on his family's farm in Iowa (USA). He's the recent author of a family-history pentalogy, *Oceans of Darkness*, *Oceans of Light: Our Troubles and Treasures in the New World*. (See http://2014.traces.org/?page_id=87 for details). He divides his time between Germany and the American Heartland, as he serves as executive director of a non-profit, educational organization in each country—**Spuren** e.V. in Germany and **TRACES** (www.roots.TRACES.org) in the U.S.

