

# I Acknowledge by Ruth Chevion

I speak for myself.

I can't forgive and I can't forget. What the Germans did to the Jewish people is unforgivable. And there is no way I can forget.

But something has shifted; I feel a need to 'acknowledge.'

Starting in 2005 and up until 2018, my mother, Herta Grabstald z"l, received a check in the mail every month from Germany for about \$1200. As I understand it, the money was actually being paid by Austria, where my mother was born, with Germany providing the administration.

There was a surprising amount of administration involved. Any change of address or bank account might require a phone call to Germany and documents. Mom had to visit a certain doctor at regular intervals, to prove she was alive. She actually got a kick out of this bi-annual ritual - it made her laugh.

Joking aside, my mother took it seriously. She instructed me several times, to be sure to call Germany as soon as she died. It was one of the first things I did after it happened. I know it meant a lot to her to be correct with Germany.

In fact, the money had helped her. I won't go into detail, but I can say it made a difference. It was enough to enable her to improve her life.

These payments were part of the German policy of *wiedergutmachung* (Vee'der goot mah-khung), meaning "making good again."

The Germans were paying this money in order to make good again their standing with Jewish people, with Israel, and with Holocaust survivors. This was a giant program of reparation in which Germany paid billions of euros to Jewish survivors of the Holocaust.

My point is that for me personally, it worked.

I used to not wear Birkenstocks, or those nice aviator glasses or drive a VW. I had my private little boycott. But over many trips to Israel, I learned from Israelis, that Germany has been helpful to Israel economically and in political ways as well.

I take notice that the people who paid this money, and the ones who answered the phones when we called, were not themselves Nazi murderers. These were not perpetrators. They were young people, men and women who had to have been born way after it happened, who took it on. To me this is meaningful.

Also highly meaningful to me, was the way it was done. It did not feel as though the money was being tossed across the table. My mother's move from Manhattan to Hopkinton caused a flurry of changes of passwords and account numbers, so I had plenty of contact with Germany, all in good English, all considerate, all polite and efficient. Plus it was done quietly. There has been no advertisement or political bragging by Germany about paying reparations.

I acknowledge that the German people have accepted responsibility for what they did. I make this statement publicly in the February 2022 Temple Israel newsletter.

I have a favorable impression of Germany right now. In addition to payments to individual survivors, Germany has been an economic partner with Israel, and has stood with Israel. Under Angela Merkel's leadership Germany has accepted a good number of refugees from Afghanistan, pursuant to the notion that Germany must set right its moral character and its reputation in the world because of what Germany did under Hitler.

Hats off to Chancellor Angela Merkel for visiting Yad Vashem again, shortly before she left office. It was her leadership that carried the banner of *wiedergutmachung* into the twenty-first century. She was a great leader in my eyes, deserving of special appreciation. I could see her in the same room with Margaret Thatcher and Golda Meir.