Murat and Nevin and the divided past

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How do young Germans from migrant backgrounds view the injustices of the past? Josefine Raasch talks to two sixteen-year-olds in Berlin

Photo: Berit Becker

THIS is the story of Murat and Nevin. It is about how they connect to the past and how they think about historical injustices. Both boys are sixteen years old. They are students at an inner-city Berlin secondary school and describe themselves as Kurds with German citizenship. Murat is tall and slim. The first thing I noticed about him was his unbridled energy. He seemed to find it hard to sit down or to stand still. He is a fast thinker and often surprised me with his pointed, hilarious remarks. Nevin looked older than he was; he already sported a beard. He was physically stronger, and seemed more thoughtful than his energetic friend. Both were well regarded by their classmates.

I interviewed Murat and Nevin earlier this year as part of my PhD research into concepts of historical justice among German teenagers. I asked them about their understandings of justice and of history, and about how they think we should deal with injustices that occurred in the past and reverberate in the present. When I asked, “What do you need justice for?” Murat answered, “For feeling well with oneself. Without justice we wouldn’t be here, because we are foreigners.”

He was, I think, referring to the intolerant politics of the Third Reich, mixing up Nazi anti-Semitism with Neo-Nazi propaganda against Ausländer, foreigners. But both Murat and Nevin were born and raised in Berlin and have German citizenship, so why were they identifying themselves as foreigners?

Like many cities in the former West Germany, during the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, West Berlin attracted a large number of temporary and permanent immigrants from southern and south-eastern Europe and from Turkey. What makes Berlin special is the unusually high concentration of immigrants in particular parts of the city, and the fact that immigrants from Turkey comprise such a large proportion of the immigrant population. While cities such as Frankfurt and Munich have become multicultural, parts of Berlin have become bicultural.

This has become a hugely controversial issue in Germany. In his phenomenally popular book, Deutschland schafft sich ab (Germany Is Digging Its Own Grave), the former central banker and prominent Social Democrat Thilo Sarrazin argues that most of Germany’s immigrants – and its Muslim immigrants in particular – cannot be integrated into German society. In fact, he claims that many of them don’t want to be integrated. Sarrazin, who is himself of Polish, English, Italian and French Huguenot ancestry, also blames immigrants for “dumbing down” German society, and claims that Muslim immigrant women are reproducing at such a rate that Germans may soon become strangers in their own country. The German chancellor, Angela Merkel, has rejected Sarrazin’s statements as “totally unacceptable” and “discriminatory.” But she has also declared that attempts to create a multicultural society have “utterly failed.”

In Berlin, every second student has a migrant background. The class in which I conducted my fieldwork was fairly typical in that respect: 57 per cent of students had a migrant background, and half of the class identified either as Turkish or as Kurdish. The rather awkward term, “with a migrant background,” is a translation of the German mit Migrationshintergrund. Usually, people living in Germany are considered to have a migrant background if at least one of their parents is not German by birth or was not born in Germany. Not too long ago,
a person with a migrant background living in Germany would have simply been called an *Ausländer*, a foreigner. The new vocabulary is not just politically correct Newspeak; it reflects the fact that an *Ausländer* was expected to live in Germany only temporarily, whereas somebody with “a migrant background” is thought to have permanently settled in Germany (or to be the offspring of somebody who has permanently settled).

Murat and Nevin don’t describe themselves as having a migrant background. They describe themselves as *Ausländer*, as foreigners.

I asked them whether they were interested in history as a subject in school. Murat said that he finds it important to know what happened in the past, but that the past is explored in too much detail at school. For Nevin, history lessons are not necessarily the way to find out about the past. He mentioned the Kaiser-Wilhelm-Gedächtniskirche, the iconic ruins of a church in the centre of West Berlin, which were left standing as a memorial rather than razed after second world war. “When you see the church you want to know,” he said. “You become curious. And then you need background knowledge [to understand it].”

I asked them what they would want to be taught in Year Nine history. Murat was interested in the two world wars, because, “If so many people died, then it’s probably important.” He would also be interested in learning about the Stone Age. But he was much less interested in other topics – the French Revolution, for example, which he said would be of no interest to someone living in Germany. Nevin agreed. Both boys were interested in the second world war because they live in Germany, and also because some of the old people in the Kurdish community, whose views they respect, keep talking about that war. Murat and Nevin want to know about its causes, about what happened and about what people at the time thought. Murat said that the persecution of Jews would also be of interest to them. He commented, as if trying to explain this particular interest, “Actually, that did not happen a long time ago.”

According to them, the first world war is truly past, whereas the second world war reaches into the present. Nevin noted that many Jews still feel disadvantaged, and that in Germany there are still Nazis who object to the presence of Jews or foreigners.

But when I asked them whether the two wars had anything to do with them, they shook their heads. “No, they’ve got nothing to do with us. We don’t talk about them.” That seemed to conflict with their interest in the second world war or their description of themselves as foreigners. I wondered then whether they talk about the past at all. “Yes, [we talk] about what happened to the Kurds.”

They explained to me that the Kurds were asked to support the Armenians and the Turks (but did not mention the enemy of the latter); in return the Kurds were promised their own country. The Kurds did as they were asked, but were then betrayed by the Armenians and Turks. “That is unjust,” Murat said. He and Nevin have learned this history from their parents and from the internet, which they searched to satisfy their curiosity about what happened in the Kurdish past.

While they admit that the history they are taught in school is important for orientating them to the country in which they live, they receive it passively and their knowledge of it is limited. In contrast, they actively pursue their interest in the ethnic historical background of their families. So how do Murat and Nevin connect to that past? They ask questions about the past and discuss possible answers, not only with their parents, but also with peers. They formulate theories, gather evidence to support them, discuss their opinions. They talk to witnesses, such as their parents and grandparents, and are alert to traces of the past when holidaying in Turkey.

Their curiosity is not surprising. Murat told me that his parents had to emigrate because of their ethnicity and their religious sentiments. Nevin said that his grandmother’s village had been completely destroyed by Turkish forces. His grandmother now lives in Berlin. He himself saw a bomb exploding in the mountains while on holiday in Turkey, near the place where his grandmother used to live. I asked if they thought Kurdish people should be compensated for their suffering. “No,” answered Murat. “They should just be given their country. That would still not be just, but they would be satisfied with that.”

Murat invokes the concept of justice when talking about the victimisation the Kurdish people have experienced over the past ninety years. Instead of wanting the Kurds to be compensated for their suffering, he wants the
Turks to treat them justly by allowing them to create their own nation state. At that point both boys explained that they feel much more connected to Kurdish history than to German history. Yet, at another point in the interview, they said they identify more as Germans than as Kurds. For them, though, this shifting between national identities may not feel at all contradictory. It certainly reflects the complexity of their experiences.

I also asked them about the German past – and particularly about the Holocaust. They hadn’t yet dealt with this in school, so knew little about it. I told them about concentration camps and, trying to elicit a statement about historical justice, asked them whether they thought Holocaust survivors should be compensated for their suffering. They supported claims for compensation based on the suffering each individual had endured. They thought the compensation should be commensurate with the suffering – that it ought to be paid for as long as the suffering lasted; that is, somebody who was imprisoned in a concentration camp for five years would then receive a pension for five years.

I asked whether they thought Germany should be responsible for the compensation. Murat replied, “The Holocaust was Hitler and not Germany. The [current] German government has nothing to do with it. There are good and bad presidents and this was a bad one.” Nevin had a different perspective. He thought that Germany and its citizens are to blame, because the German citizens in 1933 voted for Hitler. “Okay,” Nevin said, “he didn’t tell the whole truth, but they voted for him. And the people, actually over half of them, wanted this to happen.”

It is interesting to compare their response to what happened to the Jews in Nazi Germany with their response to the treatment of Kurds in Turkey. Murat and Nevin’s understanding of Kurdish–Turkish history was based on their own experiences, on family history and on the intergenerational transmission of knowledge. They had strong views about the injustices suffered by Kurds, and talked about the present in a historical context. In talking about justice in this context, they perceived the Kurds not as a group of individuals, but as a people.

In contrast, both boys approached the German past as if they were spectators. They were not particularly curious about it, and did not ask me to provide any information beyond what I had volunteered.

When talking about Kurdish history, they both described themselves as German rather than Kurdish, while strongly identifying with a Kurdish cause. When talking about German history, especially the Holocaust and Nazi Germany, they stressed that they were Kurds with German passports. Their national or ethnic identity is quite unstable and they use it flexibly according to context.

SINCE reunification there has been much debate among German historians and educationalists about whether the teaching of history should be used to help create and maintain a national identity. With the number of German citizens with migrant backgrounds steadily increasing, some argue that students need to be oriented in time and space as well as be able to deal with the conditions of globalisation and migration. While it remains important to teach German history, they argue, students also need to learn about transnational and intercultural histories rather than focus on the history of separate nations.

Related to that debate is the question of how students like Murat and Nevin should be introduced to German history, particularly the history of Nazi Germany and the Holocaust. Scholars like Jan Motte, Viola Georgi and Rainer Ohliger have tried to find out whether students with a migrant background exclude themselves from the “Haftungsgemeinschaft,” the community which is accountable and responsible for the injustices of the Holocaust.

In 2006, Rainer Ohliger and his colleagues conducted a survey in which he compared attitudes towards history among students with a Turkish migrant background and students without a migrant background. Ninety per cent of so-called “German” students and 80 per cent of German-Turkish students said that it was important for them to learn about the Nazi past. While only a minority (18 per cent of the “German” students, and 22 per cent of the German-Turkish students) thought that this history was over-represented in the media, 42 per cent of the German-Turkish respondents felt that it was under-represented at school (as opposed to only 29 per cent of the “German” students). Both groups showed similar responses to the questions about whether the Nazi past had something to do with them.

These rather minor differences in attitudes suggest that multiculturalism has been more successful in creating a new, integrated German identity than both Sarazzin’s book and the debate it created suggest. Interestingly, despite their different arguments and results, both Ohliger’s study and Sarazzin’s book assume that there is a
confrontation between nationalities, ethnicities and cultures within Germany. In contrast, Murat and Nevin's stories suggest that such a confrontation may not exist in the experiences of German teenagers. Although Murat and Nevin used terms like “foreigners,” “Kurdish” and “German,” they used them differently in different contexts. While they used the word “foreigner” to denote their “migrant background,” which seemed to suggest a strong disconnection from German identity, at other times, in other contexts, they referred to themselves as being German. Similarly, their moral sentiments towards past injustices were seemingly changeable, sometimes even contradictory. This, however, seemed consistent with their fluid national and ethnic identities. Unlike the solid concepts and distinctions created by the adults who theorise about German teenagers’ attitudes to history and historical justice, the experiences and attitudes of Murat and Nevin reflect a more flexible, liquid response to these issues. It seems that for them, multiculturalism does not emerge in society between individuals or groups but inside themselves.