

## **Rede von Brain Harpuder bei der Verlegung der Stolpersteine für seine Großeltern und seinen Vater am Südwestkorso 59, 24.2.2020**

Thank you everyone for coming today to this special ceremony as we honor the memory of not just my father and grandparents but really all of those who fell victim to the Nazi regime. Thank you very much to the US' Chargé', Robin Quinville, for her remarks as the representative of a nation which has provided my family such amazing opportunities. I would like to say a special thank you to Gisela Morel-Tiemann, from the Charlottenburg Stolpersteine coordinating committee. Gisela has very patiently walked me through this process and her efforts to push this through while I am still stationed here are greatly appreciated. I would like to say thank you to all of my office teammates in the Embassy who have been enormously supportive of the time I have spent pursuing so many different aspects of my family history in Berlin. Of course, the biggest thank you goes to my family who have heard story after story, spent countless hours watching me track down tiny bits of data, and who have literally turned over tombstones in a cemetery to help me put this big puzzle together. We will all walk away from this tour with a greater understanding of who we are as a family, our family history, the importance of always learning from history, and a strong appreciation for the great city Berlin is and the great country that Germany is today.

I would like to take a few moments to give you a little more than just a biographical history of those whose memories we honor today. I want to tell you what this means to my family and I, and why this is really a small portion of German history and American history. As you know, the word Stolpersteine literally translates from German as Stumbling Stones. Normally, when we think of stumbling over something, we think about catching our foot on a rock, a curb, a child's toy, and frequently following that with a few choice expletives, particularly, if we hit the ground. However, sometimes, we stumble across something we didn't know, a 2 euro coin, or a new restaurant or an amazing experience. Over the next few minutes I will tell you about the numerous stumbles I have made on this journey to today, and what I have learned.

My first stumble was really my parents' stumble when they visited Berlin in 2006. Both my parents were fluent in German. Though we had come here as a family in 1993, we really had not started piecing all of the family history together. When my parents came for their second visit, they had a little book showing where my other Grandmother lived in Oranienburg. Low and behold they found the building, surprisingly not destroyed given the intensive bombing Oranienburg faced. As it turns out there were Stolpersteine in front of the building for my great-grandparents. We knew nothing about the Stolpersteine program before then. Subsequent to that we had stones placed for my grandmother, Ilse, and my great uncle Kurt. A special thanks to Minette von Krosigk for all of her work on those stones.

My next stumble was in 2011 when while teaching at the US Naval Academy I had the opportunity to visit Shanghai while escorting Midshipmen. Already in 2007 I knew that my grandfather Hans' tombstone had been found by an Israeli expat. I was afforded the opportunity to hold that tombstone, take a picture with it, and say the Jewish memorial prayer. I literally felt my father looking down on me saying thank you for being the first person in my family in more than 70 years to see it. As it turns out, the story of me seeing that tombstone was shared with others....I will come back to that later.

My next stumble came in 2017 as I was sitting in Hawaii looking through the list of Navy billets open during my expected rotation time period. Magically, Berlin appeared on that

list. Though we had asked for Europe before we were repeatedly turned down by the Navy and assumed this would happen again. Shockingly, the Navy said yes, and we excitedly began planning our move. During the transition to Germany, I stopped in Los Angeles and did a review of the records that were there to include original Nazi era passports, documents that I came to learn took away my father's and grandfather's citizenship, and numerous other documents covered with Swastika Stempels all of which bearing the names of members from both sides of my family.

My next stumble came in the summer of 2018 as I did a Google search for Hans Harpuder. I came across a genealogical website where someone was asking for information about Hans Harpuder. I joined the site and essentially asked who are you and what do you want? After a couple of emails we decided to talk on the phone. Within a two hour conversation she gave me her login and password and we began to update my family's tree that she had largely completed. Why was she doing it? She heard about my visit in Shanghai while taking a tour of Jewish Shanghai and decided to research the family history since she always had an interest in genealogy. We are now regularly exchanging emails and spoke about 3 weeks ago working together to extend my family tree further on my mom's side. Not often that you randomly become friends with a 76 year old woman who you only know through the internet and phone. While unfortunately, she is not here, I owe Karen Schneider an enormous debt of gratitude.

I also attended my first Jewish services in Germany during the fall of 2018. That Yom Kippur provided the most cathartic moment I have had here, as I finally broke down realizing where I was, my family's generations of history in Berlin, and could hear my father saying, you finally understand it all. Much more I could share about that experience.

In October, 2018 I stumbled into a conversation with a German Naval officer during which my family's history came up. As we discussed why we serve each of our respective nations, I indicated I serve to support a nation that gave my family so many opportunities, particularly given their likely fate had they stayed in Berlin. He indicated he served because his grandparents were the perpetrators and he is committed to never letting it happen again. No awkwardness, no hard feelings, just two Naval officers committed to serving our respective nations and committed to advancing our common interests.

In January 2019 my children and I went to the Jewish cemetery at Weissensee to search for family tombstones. Barb and I had tried this before but had no luck. We were armed with some specific burial plot information the second time but still could not find the Harpuder gravestones. We couldn't even find the numbers and then all of a sudden Ellie came across one of the numbers and we started counting plots. At that point, Ethan, Seth and I, along with our friends the Silvertons who had joined us, started pulling weeds off of stones and then literally were flipping pieces over. Eventually we were able to reveal the Harpuder name and the graves of my great and great great grandparents. No one in my family since before World War II had seen these stones before; my father couldn't find them on his two return trips. As it turns out, just 4 weeks ago while visiting LA I stumbled across more information which covers great great grandparents on my mother's side who are buried in Weissensee.

In early 2019 I was introduced to Jogi Bodestaff who as it turns out had a friend who worked for the Berlin government at the time, Erik Nils Voigt who was in charge of the division of government that supervised restitution claims to Holocaust victims. I was subsequently able to go through the full records of the Harpuder family including numerous documents that I never knew existed including addresses where family members were

born. Erik and Jogi are good friends today and demonstrate why we should not hold grudges against the present generation for the sins of the previous.

I came across the records for my great grandmother Gertrud which show the train she was deported on from Berlin to Theresienstadt and then subsequently to Auschwitz where she was murdered. I visited the spot at the Gleis 17 memorial where that train indicated on Yom Kippur, the day of atonement and memory. Separately, I went again with our Ambassador to help provide a personal story to make the experience more relevant.

I have just come across a picture of my Grandmother Ilse taken just 10 meters from where her Stolpersteine sits today. I found out that the first Stolpersteine placed in Berlin was for the aunt of my Grandfather Erich who she raised. The stumbles just keep going.

<https://www.tagesspiegel.de/berlin/berlins-erster-stolperstein-lauf-mal-drueber-nach/8310052.html> ..

All of these stumbles have made me realize how I got to be who I am today and reinforced the importance of speaking out for freedom and liberty and against injustice. I chose to serve in the US Navy to defend liberty and freedom; I remain committed to service to my nation and in defense of those core values. I also want to ensure my children who are just the second generation beyond the Holocaust, continue to learn the lessons of history. I want them to never forget, but also to learn the importance of forgiveness and providing the opportunity to heal. I hope that all of you here today, take away perhaps a small sense of inspiration and commitment to these same values as you stumble in various ways through your lives. I serve here as a proud American, living the American dream, but I also serve here as a Jew, the son and grandson of Holocaust survivors and feel completely at ease, if not proud to wear socks with the German flag on them. Thank you again for coming.