

Atoning for the Past?
Conflicts of Historical Understanding in the Memories of ASZ and ASF Members
(1958-1990)

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Abstract

The thesis project seeks to contribute to the existing research on the history of the German civil society organization Aktion Sühnezeichen Friedensdienste which was founded in 1958 by Lothar Kreyssig. The focus will lie particularly on the memories of the East German members of the organization who had to deal with the fact that their ideals and opinions concerning the Third Reich past of Germany did not conform with the the East German state's view due to the dominance of the anti-fascist doctrine in the GDR's memory culture.

By focusing on the experiences and individual memories of Aktion Sühnezeichen members, we open up the established interpretation that arises when looking at the work and history of Aktion Sühnezeichen from a top-down perspective. First, how do the interviewees express their individual memories? Memories are as much a reflection of the present as the past. What differences and commonalities do we see among the different ASZ members in their process of reminiscing parts of their life story and what role does the generational gap to the end of the Third Reich and Holocaust play? Second, this may also show us how individual memory mobilized the interviewees to become involved in non-conformist activities.

Table of Contents

1. Introduction	1
2. In the GDR: State-Church Relations & Memory Culture	10
2.1. State-Church Relations in the GDR	10
2.2. The Anti-fascist Doctrine: Communists as Heroes	14
3. Lothar Kreyssig's Vision and the Two Organizations	17
3.1. The Life of Lothar Kreyssig: Founder of ASF	17
3.2. ASZ/ASF's Terminology: <i>Sühne</i> & <i>Versöhnung</i>	19
3.3. The Organizational Structure of ASF & ASZ	22
4. The Experiences and Work of ASF Members in the GDR	25
4.1. Introduction	25
4.2. First Encounters with ASZ and Personal Motivation	26
4.3. Relations with the GDR's Government and Administration	32
4.4. Kniefall Willy Brandt	38
4.5. Poland	40
5. The Experiences and Work of ASF Members in the FRG	43
5.1. Introduction	43
5.2. Kreßin's First Encounter with ASF: Similar Questions	46
5.3. Orth's First Encounter with ASF: Political Tourism in Auschwitz?	49
5.3. Finding a New Path: Volunteers in Israel	54
5.4. Meeting the Other Side: Contact and Personal Encounters with ASZ	55
5.5. Confrontation in Poland: International Youth Meeting Centre Oświęcim	58
6. Conclusions	60
7. Bibliography	62

1. Introduction

“The map broadcasted by you during the weather report constitutes a continuous provocation to the rightly suspicious Polish people. The rethinking of the Germans, which can be observed as hopeful beginnings, is being hindered.”¹

- Günter Särchen in a letter to Klaus von Bismarck,
director of the ARD, June 13th 1969

Weather maps do not come to mind easily when contemplating the Cold War divisions of Europe. Yet, thinking about what is represented by such maps that we see on television or in newspapers, we come to realize that they are representations of what the presenter, in this case the editorial department or the TV studio’s graphic designer, consider relevant to show to an audience as their territory. The quote above introduces to us a situation where an audience questioned the representation of territory chosen by the TV station’s management and constitutes an often-cited anecdote of the German civil society organization *Aktion Sühnezeichen*² whose East German branch was responsible for the letter to the ARD³. In details, the critics commented on the fact that by 1969 the ARD was using a map for its weather reports that showed the German borders in 1937, representing large chunks of the present-day People’s Republic of Poland as Germany. Besides the abandonment of the map, the letter suggested that instead of switching to a physical map, which would not show any borders, a new map should clearly feature the Oder-Neiße border. The Oder-Neiße border between Communist East Germany and Communist Poland had been recognized already in 1950 by the German Democratic Republic (GDR) but not

¹ All translations are my own unless indicated. “Die von Ihnen während des Wetterberichts ausgestrahlte Landkarte bedeutet eine ständige Provokation des noch immer und zu recht misstrauischen polnischen Volkes. Das Umdenken der Deutschen, das in hoffnungsvollen Ansätzen zu beobachten ist, wird behindert.”, Brief Günther Särchen an den ARD-Vorsitzenden Klaus von Bismarck, 13. Juni 1969, EZA 97/33, in Gabriele Kammerer, *Aktion Sühnezeichen Friedensdienste: Aber man kann es einfach tun* [Action Reconciliation Service for Peace: Yet, you can do it easily] (Göttingen: Lamuv Verlag, 2008), 130.

² Throughout the thesis ASF will refer to the organization in its pre-Berlin Wall and West German format. ASZ will refer to the East German format of the organization from 1961 to 1990. ASF e. V. refers to the organization’s format today initiated after its reunification on May 1st 1990.

³ Arbeitsgemeinschaft der öffentlich-rechtlichen Rundfunkanstalten der Bundesrepublik Deutschland [Consortium of the public-law broadcasting institutions of the Federal Republic of Germany].

yet by the Federal German Republic (FRG), which accepted the instated border only in 1970 under certain provisions. The organization received an answer a month later through its West German counterpart ASF. In the letter Klaus von Bismarck wrote that he completely agrees with the critique and would initiate changes, namely that with the introduction of the daily news program in color in March 1970 the weather map would not show any border lines. When the change went into effect, it caused critique from German expellee associations.⁴ This instance of weather map criticism is interesting because it is not only a humorous case where a grass roots organization criticizes a television program for its choice of illustration but it also note-worthy as this was not the West German branch of Aktion Sühnezeichen but a representative of its East German counter-part which made the critical comments. It shows how much the authors of the complaint thought about the effects such a presentation on TV could have on viewers in a completely different country. Here, the anecdote indicates some of the topics and issues addressed in this thesis.

After the national socialist reign had come to an end with the victory of the Allied Forces in May 1945, German citizens started to focus on reconstructing or building from scratch their physical surroundings as well as personal lives. However, while much of the energy was focused on building anew, there was also a horrendous past that entered the public realm as the atrocities committed under national socialism needed to be acknowledged. While many argued to move on and forward, some individuals and groups emphasized the need to deal with the recent past long before the 1968 debates and the *Historikerstreit* in the 1980s. One of the groups arguing for an immediate addressing of the past consisted of members and clergy of the German Protestant church. During national socialist rule in Germany, the Protestant church had been quickly aligned with the state apparatus due to the support of the German Christians. As a counter reaction the Confessing

⁴ Unknown, "Lästige Gemüter," [Cumbersome Tempers] *Der Spiegel*, February 9th, 53.

Church formed. However, due to power struggles and confessional differences the Protestant opposition never gained much influence or engaged in open support of marginalized groups on a large scale. Based on demands from former members and associates of the Confessing Church ASF was founded in 1958 based on a *Gründungsaufruf*⁵ launched during the synod of the German Protestant church. The appeal, initiated by Lothar Kreyssig, expressed the position that the first step towards postwar reconciliation had to be made by the perpetrators and their descendants, preceded by public signs of atonement.

Lothar Kreyssig said:

Primarily, we still have no peace because there is too little reconciliation. Thirteen years have passed in dull stupor, followed by new, anxious self-assertion. It threatens to be too late. Yet, we may, regardless the obligation to conscientious political decision, self-justification, bitterness and hatred, oppose with a force when we ourselves truly forgive, seek forgiveness and practice this attitude. As a sign we ask the people who have suffered violence from us that they allow us to do good with our hands and with our means in their country, a village, a church, a hospital or whatever else for the public good they want to have built as a sign of reconciliation.⁶

While initially active both in the FRG and the GDR, the organization was internally split due to the closing of internal German borders in 1961. This marked the starting point for developing different working strategies in relation to the respective German governments and different types of projects. For example, the GDR group focused on short-term services called *Sommerlager*⁷ while the FRG group was able to organize memorial site visits and long-term services, e.g. in Norway, the Netherlands and Israel. Yet, the voluntary

⁵ Translation: appeal for founding.

⁶ “Wir haben vornehmlich darum noch keinen Frieden, weil zu wenig Versöhnung ist. Dreizehn Jahre sind erst in dumpfer Betäubung, dann in neuer angstvoller Selbstbehauptung vergangen. Es droht zu spät zu werden. Aber noch können wir, unbeschadet der Pflicht zu gewissenhafter politischer Entscheidung, der Selbstrechtfertigung, der Bitterkeit und dem Hass eine Kraft entgegen setzen, wenn wir selbst wirklich vergeben, Vergebung erbitten und diese Gesinnung praktizieren. Des zum Zeichen bitten wir die Völker, die Gewalt von uns erlitten haben, dass sie uns erlauben, mit unseren Händen und mit unseren Mitteln in ihrem Land etwas Gutes zu tun, ein Dorf, eine Siedlung, eine Kirche, ein Krankenhaus oder was sie sonst Gemeinnütziges wollen, als Versöhnungszeichen zu errichten.”, Lothar Kreyssig, *Gründungsaufruf der “Aktion Versöhnungszeichen”*, Manuskript, EZA 97/1069, in Kammerer, *Aktion Sühnezeichen Friedensdienste: Aber man kann es einfach tun*, 12.

⁷ Translation: summer camps.

work of the ASF members was not publicly acknowledged nor welcomed in the GDR until the late 1980s. This was due to the GDR's conception as an anti-fascist state based on the Marxist-Leninist definition of Fascism as described by Georgi Dimitroff in 1933. The GDR's ruling party perceived and portrayed itself as the founder of a new Germany and thus rejected any responsibility for the crimes committed under national socialist rule. In their opinion, the national socialist past became the problem of the Third Reich's successor state, the FRG. As a consequence, any public actions that could be interpreted as an acknowledgement of guilt as proposed by Lothar Kreyssig and in the framework of ASF's work were excluded. The actions were considered anachronistic, provocative and unwanted. As a consequence, the GDR's authorities attempted to circumvent ASF's activities through various means, e.g. denying its members visa to travel to neighbor countries.

Despite ASZ/ASF's position as a civil society organization that developed along the political division lines of the two postwar Germanys and the organization's close connection to some of the GDR's prominent opposition leaders there are only few academic works that have explored ASZ/ASF's history in particular. Parts of the existing research are two books and a non-academic publication that focuses on the ASZ summer camps. Further, there are several chapters and journal articles that relate to specific aspects of ASZ/ASF activities, e.g. memorial trips to Poland or ASZ's work in Hungary. In the thesis the more substantial works, especially the books by Gabriele Kammerer and Anton Legerer, have been utilized to comprehend and present the overall background of the organizations, e.g. how did ASF develop previous to the Berlin Wall, what was the organizational set-up etc. These two books, "Aktion Sühnezeichen Friedensdienste: Aber man kann es einfach tun" and "Tatort: Versöhnung; Aktion Sühnezeichen in der BRD und in der DDR und Gedenkdienst in

Österreich”⁸ are only available in German. Published for the 50th anniversary of ASF’s founding, Gabriele Kammerer’s work was released in 2008. The book which was intended for an interested audience gives a broad overview of the ASZ/ASF history based mainly on the archival sources from the *Evangelisches Zentralarchiv* in Berlin. Surprisingly, there had previously been no attempts at a larger historical review by the ASF e. V. itself. Anton Legerer’s book is based on his doctoral thesis at the European University Institute in Florence. Different to the book by Gabriele Kammerer, Anton Legerer does not pursue a linear narrative but takes a topical and comparative approach and looks at the development of ASZ, ASF, and an Austrian type of volunteer service called *Gedenkdienst*.⁹ More than in the book by Gabriele Kammerer, Anton Legerer focuses on the wider network ASF/ASZ was founded in and looks at historical companions of the organization such as Erich-Müller Gangloff¹⁰. Anton Legerer’s exploration does not go beyond the German unification. Where Gabriele Kammerer is more linear in her narration, Anton Legerer’s book provides tangential information that is better explored in an academic publication. Both works make little use of oral sources although both authors indicate that personal interviews had been conducted in the research process. While both works complement each other and have to be acknowledged for their pioneering efforts in exploring ASF/ASZ/ASF e. V.’s development and history, the works lack the views of individual actors within the organization. In addition, to the two works focusing on the overall history of ASF e. V., it is also worth looking at another internally commissioned publication that was written for the 50th anniversary of the independent summer camp activities of ASZ in the GDR that continue until today. The book, which features only short background texts, relies mainly on a wide

⁸ Anton Legerer, *Tatort: Versöhnung. Aktion Sühnezeichen in der BRD und in der DDR und Gedenkdienst in Österreich* [Crime Scene: Reconciliation. Action Reconciliation Service for Peace in the FRG and in the GDR and Austrian Memorial Service] (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt 2001).

⁹ Translation: commemoration service.

¹⁰ Erich Müller-Gangloff (1907-1980) was an important influence on Lothar Kreyssig and ASF in its early years and the founding director of the *Evangelische Akademie Berlin*, in Legerer, *Tatort: Versöhnung*, 82-91.

variety of interviews with ASZ members who had been involved in the ASZ summer camps either as organizers and/or participants. “Gegen den Strom”¹¹ is helpful with regard to these additional voices that give complexity to the organization’s history in the five later decades of the 20th century, yet, too often tends to depict the ASZ as an organization that was in opposition to the GDR government. While this is indeed the case for some individuals that later moved on to the opposition groups organized within the Protestant church this notion cannot uniformly applied to the organization as a whole. This point is also expressed in the chapter by David Doellinger titled “Peace Through Reconciliation: Aktion Sühnezeichen and the Lutheran Church”.¹² The article by Edit Király on the contacts of ASZ in Hungary in the 1980s has to be pointed out for its comparative perspective and additional focus. Although it is known that ASZ was organizing activities in Hungary this is not explored in the general histories by Gabriele Kammerer and Anton Legerer. Here, Edit Király brings in a new perspective to the work of ASZ that went beyond Poland and Czechoslovakia while making use of oral sources. Overall, we may say that ASZ’s history has not yet received ample treatment within the academic literature and still offers many fruitful points of departure for further research.

As was raised in the discussion on existing research on the history and activities of ASZ/ASF, these projects mainly focus on the available material sources of the two organizations in private, ASF e. V.’s and official church and federal archives and present particularly ASZ in a certain light. While I worked as a volunteer with the organisation in the past few years, I encountered Dietrich Erdmann who was an active senior volunteer in

¹¹ Aktion Sühnezeichen Friedensdienste (ed.), *Gegen den Strom. Geschichten über Mut, Erinnerung und Demokratie aus fünf Jahrzehnten internationaler Sommerlagerarbeit von Aktion Sühnezeichen* [Against the Current. Stories of Courage, Memory, and Democracy from five decades of international summer camp work by Action Reconciliation Service for Peace] (Berlin: Aktion Sühnezeichen Friedensdienste 2012).

¹² David Doellinger, “Peace through Reconciliation: Aktion Sühnezeichen and the Lutheran Church in the GDR” in *Religion and the Conceptual Boundary in Central and Eastern Europe. Encounters of Faith*, ed. Thomas Bremer (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 166-181.

the so-called *Ü40* summer camps¹³. He shared many of his experiences as an active member of ASZ in the GDR with the younger volunteers. These memories indicated not only how differently the two organizations had developed during the forty years of German division but also how diverse the positions of an individual in this period towards individual memory of and responsibility for the Third Reich had been, especially when compared with the memories of other, older volunteers who had been ASF members in the FRG previous to the German reunification. As a consequence of the encounter, this research project is based on a particular set of sources, namely six interviews, four with people formerly involved in ASZ and two who were active within ASF, that were conducted in summer 2013 and spring 2014.

By focusing on the experiences and individual memories of ASZ members, we open up the established interpretation that arises when looking at the work and history of ASZ from a top-down perspective. Thereby, the thesis attempts to address two equally important points. First, how do the interviewees express their individual memories? Memories are as much a reflection of the present as the past. What differences and commonalities do we see among the different ASZ members in their process of reminiscing parts of their life story? What role does the generational gap to the end of the Third Reich and Holocaust play? Second, this may also show us how individual memory mobilized the interviewees to engage in the activities they engaged in. The two interviews with ASF members are utilized for a comparative illustration that shows both the differences in the activities that were possible in the different state systems the organizations operated in and the understanding of Aktion Sühnezeichen's mission as was debated after the organizations' reunification. Further, we may also see similarities in the motivations of the ASZ and ASF members of the

¹³ *Ü40* is an abbreviation for "über 40" which indicates that participants older than 40 years of age are particularly welcome to volunteer. This format of volunteering for ASF e. V. had been initiated by a group of former ASZ members who wanted to become involved again after their retirement.

earlier period (1960s and 1970s) and the later period (1980s) that can be attributed to the generational gap existing between these age groups.

For the individual but also communities, may it be organizations or whole nation states, memory has a mediating function between the past and the present. As such, agreement or disagreement between parties on how the past is remembered can have various effects, e.g. these can constitute the basis for a group but may also be the reason why a group falls apart. Naturally, groups may struggle on which events they choose to forget as well. When talking about memory we may think of three types: individual, collective and institutional.¹⁴ To a certain degree, we encounter all three types of memory in this thesis. Individual memory is represented in this thesis through the individual interviews. However, as Maurice Halbwachs first ascertained individual memories do not stand by themselves and are influenced by social factors such as the collective memory. Institutional memory refers to a top-down process where an elite constructs a framework that shapes the memories of collectives and individuals.¹⁵ We may speak about institutional memories when we look at the anti-fascist paradigm that the GDR's leadership instated concerning the official interpretation of the Third Reich and the Holocaust. However, we may also note that it is difficult to determine the extent to which such top-down impositions truly emanate to the public. As such, institutionalized forms of memory are important, but we have to keep in mind that leaders, particularly in democracies, should be limited in how far these memories can be imposed. Memory studies, especially in German academia, have experienced a type of boom in the last decade despite continuing discussion concerning the definition of individual and collective memory and the various alternative types of memory that have been suggested. An experience which is recounted as memory is a "highly subjective

¹⁴ Richard Ned Lebow, "The Memory of Politics in Postwar Europe," in *The Politics of Memory in Postwar Europe*, ed. Richard Ned Lebow, Wulf Kansteiner and Claudio Fogo (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2006), 8.

¹⁵ Lebow, *The Memory of Politics in Postwar Europe*, 10.

representation of internal and external stimuli, and memory is an abstract recoding and reordering of select experiences.”¹⁶ Memories are not static which means that they change depending on various factors such as time and social circumstances.

The research project is based on oral sources which bring with them methodological advantages and disadvantages. I consider it important to have different views represented in the research that potentially challenge a monolithic representation of ASF/ASZ members’ motivation to join activities and how they remember their civic engagement. Three of the interviewees were suggested by an employee of the ASF e. V. office while the other interviewees were contacts of an ASF summer camp facilitator who regularly conducts Ü40 summer camps in Czernowitz (Ukraine). The focus of the research lies on the memories of the former ASZ members in the GDR. Only one of the interviewees, Ulrich Kreßin, is still actively involved with ASF e. V. today. Four interviews were conducted with former ASZ members/employees while two interviews were conducted with former ASF members in order to indicate differences due to political and societal circumstances through comparison. This of course results in an asymmetric comparison. After contacting the interviewees via telephone or e-mail the one- to two-hour long interviews were conducted at the interviewees’ homes in Berlin, Leipzig and Dresden. All but one interviewee agreed to conduct the interviews and have them utilized in the project under their full name. The particular interviewee’s answers are included under an alias.

Three other aspects that were relevant for the selection of interviewees were the period of their engagement, the type of activities they engaged in and the position they held during their engagement. In my opinion, all of these three aspects significantly affected how the interviewees positioned themselves to the raised questions, e.g. an interviewee that only

¹⁶ Lebow, *The Memory of Politics in Postwar Europe*, 11.

participated or facilitated several ASZ summer camps had limited insight into the details of the organization's relationship with the GDR's authorities unless this was publicly shared information which it often was not. Three of the interviewees, Christian Schmidt, Friedrich Magirius and Ulrich Kreßin were more involved in the higher organizational levels of their respective organizations during their period of active engagement. Romi Romberg, Paul Berger¹⁷ and Susanne Orth brought in different views and memories as they had either stayed in the organization the longest, as was the case of Romi Romberg, or only engaged in certain activities ASZ and ASF offered.

2. In the GDR: State-Church Relations & Memory Culture

2.1. State-Church Relations in the GDR

In contrast to the relatively early distancing between ASF in West Germany and the Protestant church, ASZ was always linked to the Protestant churches in the GDR. Due to being a religiously inspired and church-affiliated organization, ASZ's development and activities have to be considered within the framework of the larger state-church relations in the GDR from the post-WWII years until 1989. Although ASZ was conceived as an ecumenical organization and used its ecumenical connections, e.g. to implement projects in Poland, this section will not focus on other denominations in East Germany as this is not intended as a detailed examination of all church activities in the GDR, which have been studied extensively in the existing literature, but an input for the reader to understand the evolving relationship between the Protestant church in the GDR and the state as these influenced the work of ASZ. In addition, it is important to keep in mind that this will be a broad depiction, as we cannot actually speak of the one Protestant church because its

¹⁷ Paul Berger did not wish to be quoted under his legal name. The name shown here is an alias chosen by the author.

activities were executed by a variety of different actors who had different relations to the state. A similar notion applies to the use of state in this section.

In comparison to other Communist states, “[r]eligious adherents in the GDR [were] overwhelmingly Evangelical-Lutheran. Catholics [were] a small, yet distinct minority; other independent Protestant denominations [were] miniscule.”¹⁸ Similar to the rest of Central and Eastern Europe, East Germany was under the Soviet Union’s direct influence since the end of World War II until 1949. While many parties and mass organizations were eliminated, the Protestant church remained intact as an independent organization due to the fact that the new postwar constitution guaranteed freedom of religions within the GDR. One reason for the relatively privileged position of the Protestant church during the post-WWII years in the Soviet Occupation Zone (SOZ) was the impression that the Protestant church had resisted interference from the national socialists by founding the Confessing Church in 1934. The Confessing Church, which dissolved after 1945, stood for a Christian resistance against the national socialist government that was perceived as acting against the will of God with several of its policies. Yet, one may not speak of a uniform movement and actual acts of resistance against the national socialists varied from pastors who simply opposed the Third Reich’s church policies while individuals such as Pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer actually disputed national socialist policies as a whole. Still, despite internal resistance, by 1945, the German Protestant church was perceived as a national church.

As an organization, the Protestant church in the GDR “retained many elements of institutional autonomy and the party-state’s willingness to work with this church body.”¹⁹ Yet, despite this comparative degree of autonomy the Protestant church also had to take

¹⁸ Robert F. Goeckel, *The Lutheran Church and the East German State. Political Conflict and Change under Ulbricht and Honecker* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press 1990), 13.

¹⁹ David Doellinger, *Turning Prayers into Protests. Religious-based Activism and its Challenge to State Power in Socialist Slovakia and East Germany* (Budapest: CEU Press, 2013), 18.

steps in order to accommodate the state. The balancing act between convictions and loyalty to the state remained a continuous problem of the Protestant church throughout the existence of the GDR. Among many, a point of contention was the international ties of the East German Protestant Church to the Protestant Church in the FRG and Protestant congregations in other Western countries. The GDR's authorities perceived the contact and cooperation with West Germany, no matter the degree, as a threat to their rule. Eventually, the East German parishes separated from the *Deutscher Evangelischer Kirchenbund* (EKD - German Evangelical Church Confederation) in 1969 and consequently, formed their own *Bund der evangelischen Kirchen in der DDR* (Federation of the Protestant Churches in the GDR). Ensuing the breaking-off from the all-German EKD, the Protestant church positioned itself as a “church in socialism” which reflected the impossible situation the church found itself in. The phrase can be interpreted as a simple statement of location, meaning that the Protestant church only acknowledged the political system it was situated in. Yet, it was also interpreted as an acceptance of the situation that the East German Protestant church was part of a prominently atheist state and was willing to accommodate that state.²⁰ One way to openly get in contact with the whole East German population for the Protestant was its social work as carried out through the *Diakonisches Werk “Innere Mission und Hilfswerk der Evangelischen Kirche in der DDR”*²¹ (Diakonie GDR). In the GDR, ASZ would become part of the Diakonie GDR in 1966 as it offered the necessary organizational status that ASZ required to execute its activities in the GDR.

In the 1980s Protestant churches become places for meetings of various groups because they have maintained some of the last “free-minded” spaces and offer various resources. The activism in the Protestant church addresses specific interests, such as

²⁰ Erhart Neubert, “Kirche und Opposition in der DDR” [Church and Opposition in the GDR], *Rapporte der Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung* 19 (2010): 9.

²¹ The Diakonisches Werk is a charitable organization of Protestant churches in Germany (Evangelical Church in Germany), Austria as well as numerous free churches. Its Roman Catholic equivalent is the Caritas.

environmental protection and peace but framed in theological terms. In terms of opposition work the Protestant church constituted an umbrella for a variety of non-conformist, dissident and opposition activities, some of them even secular in nature and “at the same time it channeled and domesticated them to a certain extent.”²² In addition, grassroots activities were decentralized and largely located at the local level in small groups. While the different Protestant church communities are not against most of these movements, they are also interested in maintaining a cordial relationship with the state authorities. This attitude of some of the Protestant church is especially antagonizing for the younger generation that aims for activities which provoke and represent open resistance. Eventually, in some parishes, e.g. Nikolaikirche in Leipzig, groups have to leave the space of the church which was based interestingly on a decision made by one of the interviewees, Friedrich Magirius, who after he left the ASZ leadership became the superintendent of the church district Leipzig-Ost and pastor at the Nikolaikirche.²³ Additionally, the ASZ leadership is caught in these conflicts as will be shown in Chapter 4 where, e.g. Romi Romberg remembers members younger than her advocating for a more outspoken resistance against the state instead of an accommodative policy which had been pursued in the previous years. This indicates that ASZ members, similar to the Protestant church as a whole, were not simply opposed to the state but attempted and debated their relationship with the GDR’s government as it changed throughout the decades. Further, it shows that at least a part of the ASZ members in the 1980s was involved in a wider church network which mostly young

²² Goeckel, *The Lutheran Church and the East German State*, 4.

²³ Ehrhart Neubert, *Geschichte der Opposition in der DDR 1949-1989* [History of the Opposition in the GDR 1949-1989] (Bonn: Bundeszentrale für Politische Bildung 1997), 494.

people were involved in and influenced by other Christian-motivated movements such as the construction soldiers.²⁴

2.2. The Anti-fascist Doctrine: Communists as Heroes

In order to understand why the work of ASZ at former sites of Third Reich violence in the GDR and in its socialist neighbor countries was perceived as anachronistic, provocative and unwanted by the government of the GDR the following section will shortly outline the history and memory politics of the East German state. Both in the FRG and the GDR the delineation of the presence from the national socialist past was the basis for both states' self-understanding. Yet, how the Third Reich came to power and what consequences to draw from this for the creation of a new German state differed tremendously. Due to its authoritarian character and the public's isolation from international debates and events the GDR's discourse on the Holocaust and the Third Reich "remained relatively constant throughout East German history."²⁵ Shortly following the end of World War II and the founding of the *Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands* (SED), a forced merger of the *Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands* (KPD) and the *Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands* (SPD), various forms of de-nazification measures were executed in the Soviet Zone of Occupation affecting judges, teachers, clerks, national socialists, war criminals and many more.²⁶ In addition, questions of complicity, reparations and

²⁴ David Doellinger, "Constructing Peace in the GDR. Conscientious Objection and Compromise among East German Christians, 1962-1989," in *Christianity and Modernity in Eastern Europe*, ed. Bruce R. Berglund and Brian Porter-Szücs (Budapest: CEU Press, 2010), 269-291.

²⁵ Anne Rothe, "The Third Reich and the Holocaust in East German Official Memory," in *Comparative Central European Holocaust Studies*, ed. by Louise O. Vasvári and Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek (West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 2009), 79-94; see also: Harald Welzer, Sabine Moller, and Karoline Tschugnall, "Die eine und die andere Welt. Das Geschichtsbewusstsein vom Nationalsozialismus im Ost-West-Vergleich" [The One and the Other World. The historical consciousness of National Socialism in East-West-Comparison], in *Opa war kein Nazi. Nationalsozialismus und Holocaust im Familiengedächtnis* [Grandpa wasn't a Nazi. National Socialism and Holocaust in Family Memory] (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag 2005), 163.

²⁶ Birgit Müller, "Erinnerungskultur in der DDR" [Commemorative Culture in the GDR], in *Geschichte und Erinnerung* [History and Memory], ed. Bundeszentrale für Politische Bildung, August 26th 2008,

Vergangenheitsbewältigung were discussed in clubs, parties and unions. However, the SED soon realized that by exchanging the political elite and focusing on the anti-fascist myth it was possible to end the discussions of the recent past and avoid intensive self-examination. The SED opted to present itself as the successor state to the anti-fascist resistance of the KPD preceding and during the Third Reich. Hence, the GDR's ruling party perceived and portrayed itself as the founder of a new Germany and thus rejected any responsibility for the crimes committed under national socialist rule. In their opinion, the national socialist past became the problem of the Third Reich's successor state, the FRG. Both Marxism and anti-fascism constituted the founding doctrines and justified both the existence of a socialist Germany as well as the socialist order in the GDR. Hence, "questioning it was therefore tantamount to challenging the legitimacy of both the GDR as an independent state and of the socialist world order at large."²⁷ In contrast, the FRG emphasized its anti-totalitarian position in the first years of its existence. This allowed both state governments to accuse the other of continuing the fascist/totalitarian tradition of the national socialist regime. Hence, the way the past was addressed in the two German states had two effects. First, it was to signify the break with the past and the ideals of the Third Reich and second, it constituted a critique and challenge to the political order of the opposite German state.²⁸

Yet, the anti-fascist myth constituted a falsification of history for various reasons. First, it exaggerated the influence and success of the German Communists resistance to national socialism. Second, it excluded the majority victim group, the Jews, from the Holocaust as persecution and concentration camp imprisonment were understood as forms of political oppression and economic exploitation and not racism. Hence, "East German

«<http://www.bpb.de/geschichte/zeitgeschichte/geschichte-und-erinnerung/39817/erinnerungskultur-ddr?p=all>» (retrieved June 9th 2014).

²⁷ Rothe, *The Third Reich and the Holocaust in East German Official Memory*, 79.

²⁸ Welzer, Moller, and Tschugnall, *Die eine und die andere Welt*, 162.

discourse largely avoided the specifically German terms ‘national socialism’ and ‘nazi’.²⁹ Third, there was supposedly little need for de-nazification as carried out in the FRG.

The official memory of the Holocaust was mainly expressed in three forms: “verbal-textual, e.g. books, both fictional and nonfictional; newspapers; spatial-imagistic, e.g. monuments; museums, pictures; and performative, e.g. ceremonies, rituals.”³⁰ Besides dedicated monuments all over the country, the three major concentration camps based in the territory of the GDR (Sachsenhausen, Buchenwald, Ravensbrück) were turned into manifestations of the socialist historical understanding. At all three sites emphasis was placed on the memory of the anti-fascist resistance fight while the memory of the victims of national socialism was subordinated. The official memorial sites were opened in 1958 at Buchenwald, 1959 at Sachsenhausen and 1962 at Ravensbrück.³¹ Yet, although this state-sanctioned discourse appeared to be omnipresent, “there are always individuals and groups – often artists and intellectuals – who will attempt to challenge it.”³² Besides the activities of ASZ that are elaborated in this thesis, literature by a variety of GDR authors such as Christa Wolf, Franz Fühmann, Erich Loest, Jurek Becker and Fred Wander challenged official narratives by focusing on aspects of collective memory that were suppressed. “Art and literature were forums to critically deal with the past and also one’s own position in national socialism.”³³

A development in the GDR’s position towards the Holocaust became noticeable only in the 1980s as the state’s economic difficulties and the drive for international recognition necessitated better relations with Israel and the USA. Changes included the “acceptance of other victim groups in the memory narrative, willingness to pay compensation and first

²⁹ Rothe, *The Third Reich and the Holocaust in East German Official Memory*, 80.

³⁰ Rothe, *The Third Reich and the Holocaust in East German Official Memory*, 80.

³¹ Müller, “Erinnerungskultur in der DDR”.

³² Rothe, *The Third Reich and the Holocaust in East German Official Memory*, 82.

³³ Müller, “Erinnerungskultur in der DDR”.

attempts at a critical examination with memory politics.”³⁴ With the German reunification in 1990, the anti-fascist understanding of the national socialist past came to an official end. As part of a historical reevaluation process memorial sites were restructured, memorials removed, and lesson plans reworked while scholars started to analyze the GDR’s official interpretations as expressed at sites, in movies, and in books. Although these manifested forms of memory are relatively clear, in how far the GDR citizens really accepted the anti-fascist narration of the past as true and in how far it penetrated collective memory is much more difficult to determine.³⁵

3. Lothar Kreyssig’s Vision and the Two Organizations

3.1. The Life of Lothar Kreyssig: Founder of ASF

Considering the beginning of ASF’s work, its founding in post-WWII Germany and its roots in the Confessing Church, it is necessary to look at the biography of ASF’s founder Lothar Kreyssig. Kreyssig’s life story, his work as a judge in the Third Reich and his personal understanding of reconciliation and atonement significantly influenced the development of ASF until Kreyssig’s retirement in 1977. The following section shall provide the reader with a few key points of Kreyssig’s life. Yet, this section shall also give an indication of Kreyssig’s personality and his enthusiasm for his project ASF that attracted and encouraged the interviewees whose experiences will be presented in the fourth and fifth chapter. While Kreyssig is not widely known today, his contribution to the ecumenical movement in Germany and work with ASF are today recognized in various ways, among them the Ecumenical Center of the reunited Evangelical Church in Central Germany and the foundation of the Lothar Kreyssig Peace Price.

³⁴ Müller, “*Erinnerungskultur in der DDR*”.

³⁵ Welzer, Moller, and Tschugnall, *Die eine und die andere Welt.*, 163.

Lothar Kreyssig was born in 1898 to a protestant grain merchant family in the Saxonian city Flöha. During World War I he voluntarily joined the army in 1916 at the age of eighteen and began studying law in Leipzig afterwards. In 1938 he received his doctorate and became a judge in Chemnitz. Although his political position until this moment were considered German nationalist, his political sympathies changed, most likely under the influence of his superior, the president of the provincial court Rudolf Ziel. Although Lothar Kreyssig initially supported the national socialist movement, his changing political attitude and his activism for the socially disadvantaged made him suspicious in the eyes of the authorities. In addition, this period of Lothar Kreyssig's life was marked by increasing religious activity which included him joining the Orthodox Evangelical Lutheran Confessional Church and becoming the leader of the *Kreisbruderrat* in Flöha.

An experience that influenced and motivated Kreyssig's work towards and within ASF was his resistance against the national socialist Action T4 euthanasia program which would lead to his eventual dismissal as a judge. During his work on matters related to guardianship he was shocked by the reports he received concerning his handicapped custodians. He noticed an unusual increase in the amount of fatalities among his wards as expressed in a letter to the *Reichsminister der Justiz* Franz Gürtner: "In the following, I presume that my assumption is correct which means that one kills certain mental patients, cared for in state institutional care, without the knowledge of relatives, the legal representatives and the guardianship judges, without the certainty of due legal process and without a legal basis."³⁶

³⁶ "Ich setzte im Folgenden voraus, dass meine Vermutung zutrifft, das heißt, dass man gewisse, in Anstaltspflege befindliche, Geisteskranke ohne Wissen der Angehörigen, der gesetzlichen Vertreter und der Vormundschaftsrichter, ohne die Gewähr eines geordneten Rechtsganges und ohne gesetzliche Grundlage zu Tode bringt." in Hans-Joachim Döring, ed., *Lothar Kreyssig. Aufsätze, Autobiografie und Dokumente* [Lothar Kreyssig. Essays, Auto-Biography, and Documents] (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2011), 144.

After researching and realizing what was happening, Lothar Kreyssig filed a charge against Philipp Bouhler, the *Reichsleiter* in charge of T4. In addition, he instructed the institutions that hosted his wards to not remove them from care without his agreement. Such open critique of national socialist policies and doctrines exposed Lothar Kreyssig to the threat of deportation to a concentration camp. Instead, he was retired early through a decree by Hitler in March 1942. Following this period, Lothar Kreyssig focused on his religious activities and personal life in Brandenburg.

In 1958 Lothar Kreyssig initiated the founding of *Aktion Sühnezeichen* at the synod of the EKD and dedicated the rest of his life to its development and maintenance. Following the building of the Berlin Wall, he focused his work on ASZ in the GDR “where Kreyssig could win over countless people for the work with his ideas and charisma.”³⁷ Yet, as the official head of ASZ he was again exposed to political pressure and was surveyed by the East German secret service. In 1971, his wife Hanna Kreyssig and he left the GDR and settled in West Berlin, where he continued to contribute to the development of ASF. The last nine years of his life he spent in a retirement home in Bergisch-Gladbach where he passed in 1986.

3.2. ASZ/ASF’s Terminology: *Sühne & Versöhnung*³⁸

Atonement is not an everyday word in the German language and as such its religious connotation remains unchanged in everyday usage. It might come as a surprise that ASF e. V. to this day refers to atonement specifically in its title (*Sühnezeichen* – Sign of Atonement) even though it is not necessarily as close to its religious roots as it was in its founding years. Nonetheless, as the word remains part of the organization’s name and was used throughout the organization’s existence both in the GDR and FRG, it continues as an

³⁷ “Mit seinen Ideen und Charisma konnte Kreyssig unzählige Menschen für die Arbeit gewinnen.” in *Aktion Sühnezeichen Friedensdienste, Gegen den Strom*, 20.

³⁸ Translation: atonement & reconciliation.

outward indication of the organization's aim. It makes it necessary to look at how Lothar Kreyssig and the other ASF founders considered atonement relevant for their work. With regard to the interviewees it will be interesting to see if they were able to relate to the particular terminology of ASZ/ASF. It will become clear that the understanding and relevance of the *Sühnezeichen* for ASZ/ASF was not stable and changed throughout the decades of their existences.

Initially, proposed as *Aktion Versöhnungszeichen*³⁹ (Action Reconciliation Sign) by Lothar Kreyssig, the name of the project was changed shortly after the presentation of the *Gründungsaufruf* in 1958 based on the suggestion by Erich Müller-Gangloff. He had indicated to Kreyssig that reconciliation and atonement would express two different notions. In his own words Kreyssig expressed this in a letter in 1961: "Whether there will then be a human reconciliation between the visitor and the visited depends on whether the other wants to and is able to grant forgiveness or not. In order to not confuse this two-part process among people with our starting point, God's own deed, we have named our service sign of atonement and not sign of reconciliation."⁴⁰

Reconciliation implies that both sides would be willing to reconcile, and it was not possible to set a reconciliation sign without a victim who would participate in the act of reconciliation. On the opposite, using the term atonement would focus on the perpetrator who seeks to atone, something that was closer to Kreyssig's idea for his future organization and less presumptuous as one could not expect the victims to accept an sign of good will from the side of the perpetrators.⁴¹ Here, atonement is perceived as a transitional stage

³⁹ Translation: Action Reconciliation Sign.

⁴⁰ "Ob es dann menschlich zwischen dem Besucher und dem Besuchten zur Versöhnung kommt, hängt davon ab, ob der andere Vergebung gewähren will und kann oder nicht. Um diesen zweiaktigen Vorgang unter Menschen nicht mit unserem Ausgangspunkt, Gottes eigener Tat verwechselt zu sehen, haben wir unseren Dienst Sühnezeichen und nicht Versöhnungszeichen genannt." Kreyssig an Johannes Müller, dat. 28. Mai 1961, EZA 97/704, in Legerer, *Tatort: Versöhnung*, 54.

⁴¹ Legerer, *Tatort: Versöhnung*, 54.

between the moment of acknowledgment of one's guilt and reconciliation, a notion that is based on the atonement of Jesus Christ who died for the sins of mankind and thus effected the reconciliation between God and mankind.⁴²

One out of many examples of the ongoing debate on the use and interpretation of the *Sühnezeichen* can be seen in an article in ASF's own regular publication, *Zeichen*⁴³, in 1973:

The word atonement indicates the necessity of reconciliation. Reconciliation is a necessary precondition for peace. The word atonement reminds of past and current guilt and interrelations of guilt. Guilt may also be assumed by the children for their fathers or by fathers for their children. The word atonement has nothing to do with material compensation or reparations. It goes very far beyond this. The word atonement means: We have to learn from history, draw conclusions, admit mistakes, to rethink, to turn around on wrong paths and search for new ways."⁴⁴

This expresses a much more activist position on the notion of atonement. It is no longer sufficient to set a sign of atonement, one has to learn and admit mistakes, even if they have not been committed by oneself but an earlier generation. Today, while atonement is still in the organization's title, its definition of atonement is no longer explicitly discussed. Here, we may look at the website of ASF e.V. where the sign of atonement is explained to its visitors as follows:

The term 'sign of atonement' qualifies the ASF peace service. It means the concrete, emblematic acceptance of responsibility for the consequences of national socialism, opens the possibility to turn around and constitutes the hope for a collective, more just and more peaceful future. ASF feels obligated to all victims of the NS dominance. 'Sign of atonement' also means to pose the cardinal theological and political question on the perpetration of an offense,

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Translation: sign, a reference to the word *Sühnezeichen* in ASF's title.

⁴⁴ "Das Wort Sühne weist hin auf die Notwendigkeit zur Versöhnung. Versöhnung ist eine wichtige Voraussetzung für Frieden. Das Wort Sühne erinnert an vergangene und gegenwärtige Schuld und Schuldverflechtungen. Schuld können auch Kinder für ihre Väter oder Väter für ihre Kinder auf sich nehmen. Das Wort Sühne hat mit materieller Entschädigung und Wiedergutmachung nichts zu tun. Es weist weit darüber hinaus. Das Wort Sühne bedeutet: Wir müssen aus der Geschichte lernen, Folgerungen zu ziehen, Fehler einzugestehen, umzudenken, umzukehren von falschen Wegen und neue Wege suchen." in *Zeichen* 1, no. 4 (December 1973): 17, in Jonathan Huener, "Antifacist Pilgrimage and Rehabilitation at Auschwitz: The Political Tourism of Aktion Sühnezeichen and Sozialistische Jugend," *German Studies Review* 24, no. 3 (2001): 521.

female perpetrators and male perpetrators, female followers and male followers, resisters and victims in history and present.⁴⁵

Not each of the interviewees referred to the *Sühnezeichen* in words. While some of them could identify very clearly with the idea to atone for the past such as Friedrich Magirius and Paul Berger, Susanne Orth expressed more of an emotional struggle to do so but eventually conceded that she did not know a more fitting term for her work with ASF.

3.3. The Organizational Structure of ASF & ASZ

The following section will provide a general overview of the organizational development of ASZ in the GDR as well as ASF in the FRG as far as it is indispensable. It is necessary to take a look at the organizational structure to understand and place comments by the interviewees as well as to comprehend what possibilities and limitations the organization and its members experienced as part of a Protestant institution in the GDR and compared to the early institutional independence of ASF in the FRG as a civil society organization.

After Kreyssig had officially presented his appeal for the founding of an *Aktion Versöhnungszeichen* at the synod in 1958, the project in its first months after the announcement has to be described as an “informal and all-German organizational structure around Lothar Kreyssig”⁴⁶ that was “integrated into existing ecclesiastical structures of

⁴⁵ “Der Begriff „Sühnezeichen“ qualifiziert den ASF-Friedensdienst. Er bedeutet die konkrete, zeichenhafte Übernahme von Verantwortung für die Folgen des Nationalsozialismus, eröffnet die Möglichkeit, umzukehren, und begründet die Hoffnung auf eine gemeinsame, gerechtere und friedlichere Zukunft. ASF fühlt sich allen Opfern der NS-Herrschaft verpflichtet. „Sühnezeichen“ heißt aber auch, die grundsätzliche theologische und politische Frage nach Täterschaft, Täterinnen und Tätern, Mitläuferinnen und Mitläufern, Widerstehenden und Opfern in Geschichte und Gegenwart zu stellen.” Aktion Sühnezeichen e. V., “Die Leitsätze von Aktion Sühnezeichen Friedensdienste” [Guidelines of Action Service for Peace] «<https://www.asf-ev.de/de/ueber-uns/ziele-und-leitsaetze/leitstze.html>» (retrieved June 9th 2014).

⁴⁶ “informelle und gesamtdeutsche Organisationsstruktur rund um Lothar Kreyssig”, in Anton Leger, *Tatort: Versöhnung*, 126.

Kreyssig's church offices in East and West Berlin.”⁴⁷ As mentioned prior, the name of the organization was soon changed to “Aktion Sühnezeichen” Already in 1959 the first volunteers were sent abroad to Norway and the Netherlands although none of the GDR volunteers received permission to join. By 1960, the organization was still conceptualized and maintained as an all-German project and the *Verein Versöhnungsdienste*⁴⁸ was founded, hosting *Aktion Sühnezeichen*, *Aktionsgemeinschaft für die Hungernden*, and *Weltfriedensdienste*.

Besides its political and emotional significance, the building of the Berlin Wall attested to the final division of FRG and GDR. As such, the “construction of the Berlin Wall on August 13th 1961 can be designated as the constitutive founding moment”⁴⁹ of ASZ in the GDR. Previous to 1961 the ASF members from the GDR had not been perceived as administratively different and had referred to the organizational structures based in West Berlin. Due to the increased travel restrictions between the two parts of the city, *Versöhnungsdienste*, which was registered in West Berlin and the recognition of its status limited to the FRG, could no longer accommodate both German parts of ASF in an organizational sense. Further, the travel restrictions made it clear that there would be no reconciliatory service of GDR volunteers abroad. As a consequence, “parallel structures [were] constructed in the GDR”⁵⁰ which also included “the adaptation of content to the legal requirements.”⁵¹ An interesting anecdote that signifies the increasing distance between the two organizations that started after 1961 was the discussion concerning ASF/ASZ's logo, the so-called *Sühnemännchen*⁵², which showed in side-perspective a bent over silhouette of

⁴⁷ “in bestehende kirchliche Strukturen der Kirchenämter Kreyssigs in West- und Ostberlin eingebunden”, in Anton Leger, *Tatort: Versöhnung*, 127.

⁴⁸ Translation: Association Reconciliation Sign.

⁴⁹ “Der Bau der Berliner Mauer ab 13. August 1961 kann als konstitutives Gründungsmoment bezeichnet werden.” in Anton Leger, *Tatort: Versöhnung*, 143.

⁵⁰ “In der DDR werden Parallelstrukturen aufgebaut.” in Anton Leger, *Tatort: Versöhnung*, 126.

⁵¹ “einer inhaltlichen Adaptierung an die gesetzlichen Bedingungen.” in Leger, *Tatort: Versöhnung*, 147.

⁵² Translation: Sign of Atonement Manikin.

a person with outstretched hands that symbolizes the humble offering to atone. Designed in the 1960s by the artist Rudi H. Wagner, the logo was used in the GDR until 1990 while ASF already in 1972 significantly adjusted the logo, decreasing its humble character, which caused a law suit by the artist and as a consequence, the omission of the logo by ASF until a new logo was designed in 1976.⁵³

Until fall 1966, ASZ was without an official legal framework and was maintained as a private initiative of Lothar Kreyssig supported by a *Leiterkreis*⁵⁴. By admitting representatives of the regional churches to the leadership ASZ achieved a sort of informal relationship with the Protestant church.⁵⁵ Most significant for ASZ's future existence and work was the agreement in 1966 that transformed ASZ into a *Fachverband*⁵⁶ within the Diakonie GDR. This event gave ASZ a concrete and defined legal status and "Kreyssig's successor's [were from then on able] to act with the full power of attorney" in matters concerning the organization. Significant elements of the organizational structure that were not officially established but nonetheless were perceived as essential were the so called *Jahrestreffen*, *Rundschreiben* and *Stadt-/Bezirksgruppen*⁵⁷. The annual meetings took place every year between Christmas and New Year and were open to all those who considered themselves part of the ASZ community, mainly participants of the summer camps, donors and ASZ staff. Generally, the annual meeting bridged the gap between one summer camp season to the next and offered the summer camp participants the possibility to engage in ASZ relevant topics as each annual meeting had a specific theme such as history, peace, and disarmament. In addition, part of the executive committee of ASZ was elected at the annual meeting. Newsletters, which were initiated by Lothar Kreyssig, were intended as well to

⁵³ Legerer, *Tatort Versöhnung*, 130-131.

⁵⁴ Translation: leadership circle.

⁵⁵ Legerer, *Tatort: Versöhnung*, 144.

⁵⁶ Translation: professional association.

⁵⁷ Translation: annual meeting, newsletter, regional groups.

create a sense of continuity and community and addressed various topics such as exegeses, poems, prayers, notes to the editor, historical texts, etc. Regional groups existed in a variety of East German cities and were a rather decentralized opportunity for people to meet. Mostly, people met once in spring and fall to volunteer and listen to a guest speaker. The organizational structure of ASZ became only an issue again when eventually ASF and ASZ had difficulties merging the two different forms of organization. Mainly these difficulties reflected the different social and political realities of the staff and members in the past four decades.

4. The Experiences and Work of ASF Members in the GDR

4.1. Introduction

“If your organization did not exist, one would have to invent it.”⁵⁸

- recorded comment by Peter Heinrich,

member of the Secretariat for Church Affairs in the GDR, March 20th 1987

The organization was originally conceived by Lothar Kreyssig as an attempt to initiate signs of a pro-active stance towards dealing with the past in the whole of postwar German society. It was important for Lothar Kreyssig that the organization should take a very inclusive approach. In Kreyssig’s understanding that meant the organization had to take an ecumenical approach to its envisioned work that would involve all Christian confessions. The participation of both GDR and FDR citizens in a volunteer service abroad could not be realized in the end due to the administrative barriers and the heightening of the Cold War tensions in postwar Germany which ultimately culminated in the organization being torn apart by the erection of the Berlin Wall in 1961. Given these constraints, an alternative option for setting a sign of atonement had to be conceived. A reorientation takes place that focuses on possibilities of “inner reconciliation” and those interested in joining

⁵⁸ “Wenn es ihre Organisation nicht gäbe, müsste man sie erfinden.” in Gabriele Kammerer, *Aktion Sühnezeichen Friedensdienst: Aber man kann es einfach tun*, 211.

ASZ are encouraged to join the *Aufbaulager*⁵⁹ of the Gossner Mission which focuses on reconstructing churches and church buildings destroyed during the war. Those who participate in the reconstruction camps then call for a form of short-term service within the GDR under the administration of ASZ.⁶⁰ ASZ concentrated more and more on offering a series of short-term volunteer opportunities throughout the GDR and later in its Communist neighbor countries. The first ASZ summer camps focus on the reconstruction of churches and parish buildings as well as on social projects such as institutions for handicapped individuals which was motivated by the fact that activities in the church enjoyed a degree of liberty from official scrutiny. In the 1970s the scope of summer camps is extended to include work on Jewish cemeteries, e.g. the Jewish cemetery in Berlin-Weißensee, and East German memorial sites.

4.2. First Encounters with ASZ and Personal Motivation

ASZ in the GDR was a religion-based organization that was part of the larger administrative network of the Protestant church. As a consequence, it does not come as a surprise that almost all four of the interviewees from the GDR came into contact with the non-governmental organization through church-affiliated networks. Especially, those three interviewees, Romi Romberg, Christian Schmidt and Friedrich Magirius, who had joined the organization in the 1960s, had encountered ASZ first through their work in regional positions in the Protestant church or their personal network. The youngest of the four ASZ interviewees, Paul Berger, had been familiar with the work of ASZ through his parents. Although this was a more indirect connection to the organization than the other three had, all four were affiliated with the Protestant church in the GDR as congregational members and for Christian Schmidt and Friedrich Magirius also through employment. How these

⁵⁹ Translation: construction camps.

⁶⁰ Aktion Sühnezeichen Friedensdienste, *Gegen den Strom*, 11.

encounters came about in detail and how they are recalled by the interviewees will provide the background for the four interviews with ASZ members that will be examined in particular in this chapter and introduce the reader to their different styles of narrating their past with ASZ.

Among the four ASZ interviewees Christian Schmidt and Friedrich Magirius encountered ASZ the earliest. Both of them were involved in the first ASZ summer camps taking place in the GDR. As Christian Schmidt puts it colloquially, he got his first engagement with ASZ by mere chance.⁶¹ From 1958 to 1965, Christian Schmidt worked for the Protestant church in Magdeburg as a coordinator for church youth work. Within the territory of the GDR Magdeburg was one of the most severely devastated cities after World War II.⁶² He had not heard about the *Gründungsaufruf* of Lothar Kreyssig before meeting him in the office of his superior, the superintendent of the church circuit Magdeburg. Similar to Christian Schmidt, Pastor Friedrich Magirius first encountered ASZ in 1964. Since 1958 he had been pastor of the Protestant church community in Einsiedel near Karl-Marx-Stadt⁶³ which hosted an ASZ summer camps in 1964. Like Dresden, the small town had been heavily bombed in March 1945 and the local church had been almost completely destroyed. While he had not heard about the founding of ASF/ASZ prior to his first encounter with Lothar Kreyssig, Friedrich Magirius is very clear about his motivation to become a pastor and consequently active in ASZ:

As a fourteen-year-old I experienced the air raid in Dresden, escaped the basement alive and experienced the hunger and shortages afterwards and [...] the next dictatorship. As students we attempted democracy in '46. When the

⁶¹ *Christian Schmidt*: “Ich bin ja ein bisschen [...] dazugekommen, wie die Jungfrau zum Kind.”; Translation: *Christian Schmidt*: “Well, I got there a bit [...] by mere chance.”

⁶² Aktion Sühnezeichen e. V., “Aktion Sühnezeichen nach der Teilung 1961. Sommerlager der Aktion Sühnezeichen Ost,” [Action Reconciliation Service for Peace after the Division in 1961. Summer Camps of Action Reconciliation Sign East] «<https://www.asf-ev.de/de/ueber-uns/geschichte/shnezeichen-ost-und-west/asf-geschichte-nach-teilung.html>» (retrieved June 9th 2014).

⁶³ After 1990 Karl-Marx-Stadt has been renamed to its pre-war name Chemnitz. It is located in the German federal state Saxony.

SED was formed by joining SPD and KPD, it moved us boys and then I thought “What can I do?” and then the two German states formed and so I consciously went to the GDR and not to [Western Germany], I had started in West Berlin, as the ecclesial college was there. [...] Yet, I wanted to become a pastor here.⁶⁴

Friedrich Magirius (born 1930) and Christian Schmidt (born 1935)⁶⁵ belong to a generation that was quite young in 1945 but old enough to remember the last years of the Third Reich and World War II. In the case of Friedrich Magirius, it is interesting to see that he refers to his dramatic memory of the Dresden air raid while Christian Schmidt only refers to the loss of his father in one sentence.⁶⁶ Friedrich Magirius also emphasizes his choice not to stay in the FRG and consciously chose to take office in the GDR.

As mentioned previously, ASZ in the early 1960s was very much driven by Lothar Kreyssig who established a network of volunteers and assistants by contacting various Protestant church leaders in the GDR. Both Christian Schmidt and Friedrich Magirius speak about their memories of the ASZ/ASF founder during the interview. For them, their first encounter with ASZ was still very closely connected to the activism of Lothar Kreyssig. Yet, their memories of how Lothar Kreyssig was positioned to the organization differ. Concerning Lothar Kreyssig’s leadership style, Christian Schmidt recalls that “Kreyssig had a bit of a Catholic prior’s thinking who consults with his brothers and his sisters but what he does, he decides.”⁶⁷ Here, Christian Schmidt implies that Lothar Kreyssig’s leadership style

⁶⁴ Friedrich Magirius: “Ich hab den Bombenangriff als 14-Jähriger erlebt in Dresden, sind aus 'm Keller noch rausgekommen, lebendig und hab den Hunger und den Mangel danach erlebt und [...] die nächste Diktatur. Wir haben als Schüler Demokratie '46 versucht. Als die SED sich zusammenschloss aus SPD und KPD, das hat uns als Jungs schon bewegt und dann hab ich überlegt "Was kannst denn machen?" und dann entstanden die beiden deutschen Staaten und da bin ich bewusst in die DDR gegangen und nicht nach [Westdeutschland], ich hab in West-Berlin angefangen, da war die kirchliche Hochschule. [...] Aber ich wollte Pfarrer hier werden.”

⁶⁵ Christian Schmidt, “In den Augen des Staates: ‘Geheim und illegal’,” [In the Eyes of the State: ‘Secret and Illegal’] *Zeichen* 39, no.1 (2012): 18.

⁶⁶ Christian Schmidt: “... meine Mutter ist mit uns vier Kindern, mein Vater ist gefallen, nach dem Krieg da nach Wernigerode gekommen und da bin ich aufgewachsen.”; Translation: Christian Schmidt: “... my mother came with us four children, my father was killed in action, after the war we went to Wernigerode and there I grew up.”

⁶⁷ Christian Schmidt: “Kreyssig hatte so ‘n bisschen dieses Denken eines katholischen Priors, der sich mit seinen Brüdern und seinen Schwestern berät, aber was er macht bestimmt er.”

was authoritative. Friedrich Magirius does not comment on the leadership of Kreyssig during those first years of ASZ. Instead, he emphasizes his personal admiration for the ASZ founder as for example expressed in the following: “A special personality [...] with his [...] fantastic body of thought und his innermost rootedness in history, specifically not [...] ancient history but scriptural history ...Incredible, incredible!”⁶⁸ Both quotes are just one example of the different ways these two men choose to narrate their memories. While both Friedrich Magirius and Christian Schmidt held offices in the Protestant church, Christian Schmidt takes an approach towards recounting his memories of his ASZ involvement that appears much more sober than the emotional way of Friedrich Magirius who strongly emphasizes his religious motivation to contribute to the work of ASZ but also for staying in the GDR when he could have chosen otherwise.

Romi Romberg (born 1943) was hired as the secretary for ASZ when she was living in Berlin in 1969. She would remain with the organization until her retirement in 2008. Already when she describes her reasons for taking her position at the ASZ office, it becomes clear that she sees herself as a non-conformist in retrospective. Asked how she first got in contact with ASZ she replies:

This is a really funny story. I worked in foreign commerce for the GDR, a wonderful position with many opportunities for advancement and lots of money but also politics ... I could live with that for a few years and then we got a new boss, a working-class child with zero education and a 300 percent party consciousness and one could not stand it anymore. And so, I told all [my] acquaintances: ‘I am looking for a new job.’⁶⁹

⁶⁸ *Friedrich Magirius*: “Eine besondere Persönlichkeit [...] mit seinem [...] fantastischen Gedankengut und seiner innersten Verwurzelung in Geschichte, nämlich nicht [...] historische Geschichte, sondern biblische Geschichte ...Ungaublich, unglaublich!”

⁶⁹ *Romi Romberg*: “Das ist eine ganz witzige Geschichte. Ich habe beim Außenhandel der DDR gearbeitet, eine wunderbare Stellung mit ganz viele Aufstiegsmöglichkeiten und viel Geld, aber die Politik ... Damit konnte ich ein paar Jahre lang leben und dann haben wir einen neuen Chef bekommen, ein Arbeiterklassenkind mit Null Bildung und 300 Prozent Parteibewusstsein und es war nicht mehr auszuhalten. Und da habe ich allen [meinen] Bekannten gesagt: ‘Ich suche ‘ne neue Arbeit.’”

The above quote indicates that despite the opportunities a job at the GDR's Chamber for Foreign Commerce offered, it was more important for Romi Romberg to work in an environment that better matched her political convictions, which she does not explicitly state in the anecdote but evidently suggests that she had not "300 per cent party consciousness." One of her acquaintances from Magdeburg, Günther Särchen, knew that ASZ had a matching job offer and shortly after Christian Schmidt came to her to suggest the secretary position to her. Different to Christian Schmidt and Friedrich Magirius, Romi Romberg got involved with ASZ not through her position in the Protestant church but by using her personal network. Further, her motivation to join ASZ at least in the beginning was much more mundane in the sense that she joined because she needed employment rather than her conviction that Germans should address their recent past. Yet, when asked if she dealt or spoke with her friends and acquaintances about the Third Reich outside of work, she states that

It was always a big issue. Politics from then until today. [There] was no conversation without politics unless when [drinking] red wine. And well, I myself come from Silesia and that problem with Poland was on-going and Magdeburg was a big garrison town with many Russians, ah yes, and my grandfather was a born-and-bred Siberian. Every aspect of life was infused by the politics of East and West. Part of our relatives lived in the West, so one cannot divide these things.⁷⁰

Romi Romberg, who is younger than both Christian Schmidt and Friedrich Magirius, emphasizes less her implied war-time experiences, fleeing Silesia as a child, or her religious conviction but the connection between the present and the past she felt. As the question was asked without a specific reference to a specific date, her answer can be seen as representative of how she remembers the connections between her private conversations and

⁷⁰ *Romi Romberg*: "Es war immer ein großes Thema. Politik von anno bis heute. [Da] war kein Gespräch ohne Politik, es sei denn beim [Trinken von] Rotwein. Und da ich ja nun selbst aus Schlesien bin und dadurch diese Polenproblematik ja immer aktuelle war und Magdeburg 'ne große Garnisonsstadt war mit vielen Russen, ach so, und mein Großvater ein waschechter Sibierier ist. Jede Lebensfaser war von dieser Politik von Ost- und West durchdrungen. Ein Teil unserer Verwandtschaft lebte im Westen, also das kann man nicht trennen. Das war immer präsent."

the topics she dealt with at the ASZ office overall which were intertwined. Romi Romberg is also the one to most clearly express the difficulties of dealing with the *Sühnezeichen*. Although it might have been an accepted notion for the first members of ASZ, this was not the case in later years and is indicated when she replies:

We constantly, more or less, agonized about this, also the name [...] and also the content. We did so much education for the young people [members] but also for ourselves. To define it always new, the upcoming generation, of course, much critique appeared which we dealt with together. [...] I cannot think of another example except this name which remained after all because it is simply perfect, simply perfect.⁷¹

Paul Berger, who was not part of the ASZ administration, joined ASZ summer camps throughout the 1980s due to his parents who had attended ASZ summer camps in the mid-to late 1960s and had met each other during an ASZ summer camp.⁷² Concerning his motivation to join his very first summer camp in Ducherow in summer 1982 Paul Berger says: “We always received the newsletters and also [...] the summer camp booklets where they [the different summer camps] were presented and when I turned sixteen, which was in tenth grade, it was totally clear that I would go there.”⁷³ Paul Berger does not elaborate why it was totally clear that he would join an ASZ summer camp but it shows that involvement with ASZ was an accepted past time in the family. Concerning his previous interest in the topics of ASZ, atonement, reconciliation and the Third Reich, Paul Berger is the most specific in his memory. “During the eighth, ninth and tenth grade I engaged myself very

⁷¹Romi Romberg: “Wir haben ständig drum, mehr oder weniger gerungen, auch um den Namen [...] [und] auch über den Inhalt. Wir haben unheimlich viel Bildungsarbeit geleistet, den jungen Leuten gegenüber, aber auch uns selbst gegenüber. Es immer wieder von Neuem zu definieren, die nachwachsende Generation, ist klar, also es ist ganz viel Kritik gekommen, die wir dann aber zusammen geklärt haben. [...] Mir fällt jetzt kein Beispiel ein außer dieser Name, der aber immer wieder geblieben ist, weil er einfach perfekt ist, er ist einfach perfekt.”

⁷²This was later confirmed by Paul Berger’s father.

⁷³Paul Berger: “Wir haben immer diese Infobriefe gekriegt und auch mit diesen [...] Sommerlagerhefte, also wo die auch noch drinnen standen und als ich sechzehn wurde, das war in der zehnten Klasse, war völlig klar, dass ich da hinfahre.”

deeply with the Third Reich and especially the persecution of Jews,”⁷⁴ Paul Berger remembers. Looking back he states:

I have simply tried to clarify my situation a bit [...] and that's why I have dealt with this topic [...] and I can remember that I found a sentence or point back then that really touched me, 'What is German guilt?' [...] 'Is it personal guilt or not?' I have just thought what if I had not grown up in this family or if I had grown up back then, how would I have decided? In retrospective, it is totally clear, I would have always been on the good side but even now I am just not sure if I would have been as good as I want to be, as just [...]. By any chance I could have stood on the other side. ... This [thought] incredibly touched me.⁷⁵

Overall, the ASZ activists presented in this section remember in very different ways how they had first interacted with the organization and Lothar Kreyssig. Further, we can observe a difference between the motivations of Christian Schmidt and Friedrich Magirius who still have conscious memories of the destruction experienced during the war and Romi Romberg, who was born a decade later but who experienced the civilian consequences through a refugee status. Again, very differently, Paul Berger had no direct memories of World War II as he was born over two decades after its end. Hence, his approach to the past was more abstract by reflecting about questions of personal responsibility.

4.3. Relations with the GDR's Government and Administration

To say that ASZ had a conflicted relationship with various state institutions is correct at first sight but glosses over the fact that this relationship was changing throughout the existence of the GDR. Although the state often directly interfered in the planned projects

⁷⁴ Paul Berger: "Ich hab achte, neunte, zehnte Klasse mich, mich sehr mit dem Dritten Reich beschäftigt und zwar ins Besondere Judenverfolgung."

⁷⁵ Paul Berger: "[I]ch hab einfach versucht meine Situation ein Stück zu klären [...] und deswegen hab ich mich mit dieser Thematik beschäftigt ... ja, also von daher war ich da schon ... na ja, betroffen? vorgebildet? Und ich kann mich erinnern ich hab damals einen, einen Satz gefunden oder einen, einen Punkt der mich so richtig betroffen gemacht hat *ehm*, weil, was heißt deutsche Schuld [?] [...] 'Ist es persönliche Schuld oder nicht?' Ich hab einfach nur überlegt, wenn ich nicht in diesem Elternhaus groß geworden wäre oder wenn ich damals groß geworden wäre, wie hätte ich mich entschieden? Im Rückblick ist völlig klar, wäre ich immer auf der guten Seite gewesen, aber *ehm* ich war mir einfach auch jetzt nicht sicher, ob ich so gut, wie ich sein will, also so gerecht [...]. Ich hätte durch irgendeinen Zufall genau auf der anderen Seite stehen können. ... Das hat mich unheimlich betroffen gemacht."

of ASZ, as was the case with the failed bicycle pilgrimage, it also granted the possibility to become involved at memorial sites in the GDR at a later point. ASZ had various points of contact with the state, its representatives and its administrative units on both the national and local levels. An important mediator between ASZ and the state was the Secretariat for Church Affairs. Questions concerning the relationships between the individual member, ASZ, and the different GDR institutions are posed to the former ASZ members as this is a complex situation where different interpretations and memories are offered by the four interviewees. Looking at how people remember ASZ's position to the state tells us about the ASZ's past but also today's interpretation of that past. These interpretations indicate several positions for ASZ such as opposition, dissidence or non-conformism within the GDR. In addition, these interpretations are important to consider in comparison with the interviews with former ASF members. In their case, the FRG's government and administration were not always supportive of ASF activities but their work was not opposed or hindered as it was the case with ASZ in the GDR. Thus, ASF members could assume a much more openly critical position towards the history politics and memory culture in the FRG as was the case for ASZ in the GDR.

Christian Schmidt, who had the earliest memories of ASZ activities, remembers that during the first camps, for example in Magdeburg in 1962, the organizers attracted no suspicion as "what happened within the church ... did not interest the state for many years."⁷⁶ He concludes that "as long we [ASZ] were in Germany, I would say from '62 to '65, so Germany in the GDR, this more or less did not interest him [state]."⁷⁷ Christian Schmidt indicates that the relationship with the state was not on difficult terms from the

⁷⁶ *Christian Schmidt*: "... was wir in der, innerkirchlich gemacht haben, sag ich Mal, hat den Staat lange Jahre nicht interessiert."

⁷⁷ *Christian Schmidt*: "... solange wir in Deutschland waren, ich sage Mal von, von 62 bis 65, also Deutschland in der DDR war... hat ihn [den Staat] das mehr oder weniger nicht interessiert."

very beginning of ASZ's work. He argues that the state did not comment on what the small organization, which at this point was not yet officially part of the *Diakonie*, was doing because activities took place within the church and without larger publicity. On the one hand, the state had previously involved itself in church affairs and organizations such as the Young Parish movement whose members had to face restrictions such as the refusal to enter higher education. On the other hand, the GDR's government avoided open confrontation with alternative groups, such as ASZ, after the 1953 Uprising in East Germany to avoid further open escalation. So, it makes sense that as long as ASZ maintained a low profile and focused on projects within the Protestant church, the state would not interfere. Romi Romberg suggests a slightly different perspective on the state's view of ASZ and refers to a type of gentlemen's agreement:

We did the dirty work; they were happy that we existed. [...] [Dirty work] in facilities for handicapped people where we worked and in the church communities, the demolition works and everything. They really needed us, the GDR and that's why we had liberties in some situations and the state went with the motto 'I cannot stop the teenagers.', 'What you don't know, won't hurt you.'⁷⁸

Unfortunately, Romi Romberg does not further elaborate why the GDR would “really need” ASZ but it shows again that work within the larger church was tolerated if it did not cross an undetermined level of public outreach. In her memory, ASZ at this point is also less of a petitioner but an equal negotiator in front of the state authorities. This statement complements her previous recall of how she came into contact with ASZ and her personal representation as an individual that was not afraid in a state system that was repressive.

⁷⁸ Romi Romberg: “Wir haben die Drecksarbeit gemacht, sie waren froh, dass es uns gab. [...] [Drecksarbeit] in den Behinderteneinrichtungen in denen wir gearbeitet haben und in den Kirchgemeinden, die Abrissarbeiten und alles. Die haben uns echt gebraucht, die DDR und darum haben wir an manchen Stellen eben Narrenfreiheit gehabt und der Staat ging nach dem Motto ‘Ich kann die Jugendlichen nicht bremsen.’, ‘Was ich nicht weiß, macht mich nicht heiß.’ Das war natürlich nicht immer überall, wenn man ins Visier der Stasi geraten ist, ist es schwierig geworden, aber wenn man sich nur auf Kirchenebene bewegte, [ging es].”

Internally, ASZ members and leadership did not only discuss its relationship with the GDR's administration concerning organizational or administrative issues. Church members, and as an associated organization ASZ as well, debated throughout the GDR's existence, what it meant to be Christian in the GDR. This included question such as: Should the church openly resist all forms of cooperation with the state and particularly what social and religious responsibility lies with the individual believer? Friedrich Magirius confirms that these *Lebensfragen*⁷⁹ were constantly discussed within ASZ and various church bodies as well as the difficulty to find common ground between those that advocated for a conciliatory stance towards the state while, e.g. construction soldiers and conscientious objectors, took a stance that opposed state measures more openly. Friedrich Magirius emphasizes in his memories the freedom to discuss alternative ideas to state imposed policies that was offered within the Protestant church:

This is so easily forgotten that we actually owe, one may think about institutions what one likes, this bit of freedom to the institution church which otherwise existed nowhere else in the GDR. Of course, in private you could also maintain some freedom, but we have, measured against all the other influences, achieved a lot. And I am especially thankful for this, that we have not let ourselves be tied down, as it was unfortunately the case in other socialist countries, but rather explored this bit of freedom as best as possible.⁸⁰

What Friedrich Magirius refers to by saying “this is so easily forgotten” is the post-unification critique against the Protestant church as an institution and individuals, such as Friedrich Magirius, that they were not in any way oppositional to the state but in fact collaborated and accommodated themselves too much in a repressive system that they should have challenged or opposed more openly. Also Romi Romberg recounts the feeling

⁷⁹ Translation: life questions.

⁸⁰ *Friedrich Magirius*: “Das wird so leicht vergessen, dass wir eigentlich, mag man über, über Institutionen denken, wie man will, der Institution Kirche dieses Stück Freiraum verdanken, dass es sonst nirgends so in der DDR gab. Privat natürlich haben Sie sich auch einen Freiraum erhalten können, aber wir haben doch gemessen an der sonstigen Beeinflussung ... eine Menge geleistet. Und dafür danke ich ganz besonders, dass wir uns nicht haben binden lassen, wie das in den anderen sozialistischen Ländern leider passiert ist, sondern dieses Stück Freiraum so gut wie möglich ausgelotet haben.”

of liberty that allowed her and the other ASZ members to debate the GDR's stance towards its citizens' involvement in the Third Reich: "Within church circles this was a topic everywhere, at all feasible meetings. [...] In school I could not say something like this, I could not say something like this in the business but in private or at every church event one could say everything. Plus, who did not say it, was cowardly."⁸¹

Again, Romi Romberg, different to Friedrich Magirius and Christian Schmidt, expresses her very personal view that this available freedom to critically discuss had to be used. Yet, it needs to be noted that she remained part of ASZ until German reunification while Christian Schmidt and Friedrich Magirius sought out other positions affiliated with the church that did not necessarily grant them the same liberties as they had enjoyed in the framework of ASZ. Looking back at their professional careers within the Protestant church and in the GDR, their perspective has possibly moderated.

One way of avoiding the attraction of the state authorities' attention was to simply not advertise any of the ASZ activities in Poland or Czechoslovakia in the program. Concerning the legality of such actions, Schmidt commented it that "it was slightly illegal work. ... Yes, that always sounds awfully big, but ... for example ... the activities in Poland and Czechoslovakia and also in Hungary we did with very reliable people we could trust."⁸² What Christian Schmidt carefully phrases as "slightly illegal" was expressed more ardently by Romi Romberg who states that "officially they [summer camps abroad] did not exist, in

⁸¹ *Romi Romberg*: "Innerhalb von Kirchenkreisen ist das überall Thema gewesen, auf allen möglichen Treffen. [...] Ich konnte nicht in der Schule so was sagen, das ist klar, ich konnte nicht im Betrieb so etwas sagen, aber im privaten Kreis beziehungsweise [in jeder] Kirchenveranstaltung konnte [man] alles sagen. Und wer es nicht gesagt hat, war feige."

⁸² *Christian Schmidt*: "son' bisschen 'ne illegale Arbeit. ... Ja, das klingt immer gewaltig, aber ... also zum Beispiel haben wir ... die Einsätze ... in Polen und der Tschechoslowakei ... auch in Ungarn, das haben wir ja mit ganz wasserdichten Leuten [gemacht] auf die wir uns verlassen konnten."; Translation: *Christian Schmidt*: "it was slightly illegal work. ... Yes, that always sounds enormous, but ... for example ... the activities in Poland and Czechoslovakia and also in Hungary, those we did with very airtight people we could trust."

no way, except the bicycle pilgrimage which was authorized after three rejections.”⁸³ As such, Christian Schmidt and Romi Romberg mention several times during the interview that the members of ASZ were not submissive but tried to find loop holes that allowed them to carry out their work. This was for example the case when summer camps encountered trouble from local authorities, as Romi Romberg recalls:

We never registered a summer camp although we would have done it. We said the registration was done by presenting the camp schedule because it [the required information] is in there. And they [State Secretary for Church Affairs] approved it and the small party members from the districts occasionally gave us much trouble such as forbidding a summer camp because allegedly the sanitary arrangements were not suitable. Oh well, one just bought three wash bowls and *basta*. There was always a feud which we had to suffer in this way of ‘Trouble makes life interesting’ and thus endured. If we had this let affect us, we would have become sick. That isn’t possible; it was really a safety mechanism that worked well. Plus, the annual meetings were regularly banned, shortly before and then they could take place after all with a few adjustments. [...] It was sheer playing by the rules and by maneuvering, we yet always managed to make it through.⁸⁴

Thus, as Christian Schmidt remembers, after the *Gründungsaufwurf* in 1958 and a dormant period of little activity, Kreyssig

had approached all possible governmental offices in the GDR, including diplomatic representations regarding Poland and the Soviet Union. ... But he was rebuffed which was slightly connected with the GDR’s notion, that here were the goody-two-shoes. According to the GDR all of them [German Communists] had been in the concentration camp, which was true to a certain extent while all the other people, who had something to do with the Third Reich, those were in the West. Thus, they [GDR

⁸³ Romi Romberg: “Offiziell haben sie nicht existiert, in keiner Weise, bis auf diese eine Fahrradpilgertour, die dann nach dreimaligen Absagen genehmigt wurde.”

⁸⁴ Romi Romberg: “Wir haben nie ein Sommerlager angemeldet, obwohl wir das gemacht hätten. Wir haben gesagt die Anmeldung ist passiert in dem wir den Lagerplan überreichen, weil das da drinsteht. Und die haben das gelten lassen und die kleineren Parteileute aus den Bezirken haben mitunter sehr viel Terror gemacht, also ein Sommerlager verboten, weil angeblich die sanitären Anlagen nicht geeignet sind. Na ja, da wurden drei Waschschüssel gekauft und fertig. Es war immer sehr viel Kleinkrieg, den wir aber, ‘Ärger würzt das Leben’, auf diese Art ertragen mussten, also so ertragen haben. Wenn wir das uns zu sehr nahe gehen lassen hätten, wären wir krank geworden. Das geht nicht, das war wirklich Schutzmechanismus der gut funktioniert hat. Und die Jahrestreffen wurden regelmäßig verboten, kurz vorher und dann durften sie halt doch mit ein paar Schlenkern [...] stattfinden. Es war das reinste Regelspiel und mit lavieren haben wir’s doch immer geschafft durchzukommen.”

authorities] were strictly against people from the GDR being involved in an activity that to any extent recognized the blame for the Third Reich.⁸⁵

4.4. Kniefall Willy Brandt

An international event that encouraged the ASZ team in East Berlin to make a public statement was the *Warschauer Kniefall* by German chancellor Willy Brandt (in office 1969 – 1974) on December 7th, 1970. During a state visit to the Communist People's Republic of Poland, Brandt knelt in front of the monument for the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. The gesture was interpreted as a sign of penance and humility and is generally associated with Brandt's *Ostpolitik*. Initially, Brandt's visit had the aim of signing the Treaty of Warsaw between the Federal Republic of Germany and Communist People's Republic of Poland. The treaty established the FRG's official recognition of the post-WWII borders of Poland.

The ASZ team was impressed with the event and wanted to express their solidarity with the chancellor of Western Germany after they had been informed about the opposition to the policy in the West German *Bundestag* in 1972. After lengthy deliberations on how to execute the idea, they agreed that they should do something no matter the potential trouble as “one is always guilty, if one does not do certain things.”⁸⁶ They decide to send a solidarity message “to Brandt and thanked him for his service and wished him all the

⁸⁵ *Christian Schmidt*: “sich also an alle möglichen staatlichen Stellen in der DDR gewandt, auch an diplomatische Vertretungen, also im Blick auf die Sowjetunion oder Polen. ... aber das ist alles abgeblitzt, das, das hing hier so ein bisschen mit der Auffassung der DDR zusammen, also hier waren ja die, die Saubermänner alle. Die hatten alle im KZ gesessen nach er Auffassung der DDR, was ja zum Teil auch stimmte während eben die ganzen anderen Leute, die mit dem Dritten Reich zu tun hatten, die waren ja eben im Westen. Sofern waren Sie strikt dagegen, dass sich Leute aus der DDR an einer Aktion beteiligten, die sich irgendwie zur Schuld des Dritten Reiches bekannten.”

⁸⁶ *Christian Schmidt*: “Na ja, wir haben das so natürlich, wir haben das richtig ... lange Zeit darüber beraten, wie man das richtig macht und wie, wir, man's machen sollte und ... tja, man wird ja immer schuldig, wenn man bestimmte Sachen nicht macht ...insofern haben wir damals gesagt, wir machen das ... ganz egal was.”; Translation: *Christian Schmidt*: “Oh well, of course we have, we have really ... discussed about this for a long time, how to do it right and how, we, one should do it. ... Well, one is always guilty, if one does not do certain things ... in so far we said back then, we will do it ... no matter what.”

best”.⁸⁷ While the gesture now seems miniscule, the ASZ team was aware that “for GDR circumstances this was a big deal.”⁸⁸ The original letter was taken by Hammerstein, to West Berlin where it was dispatched to Bonn. A copy was sent by Schmidt via registered mail to Bonn and another copy Schmidt personally brought to the State Secretariat for Church Affairs with a cover letter. Schmidt left for a week to Travna in Czechoslovakia where he was replaced by Friedrich Erdmann, [...], who told him that “in Berlin all hell is let loose.”⁸⁹

While ASZ had formally not independently existed as an organization, it had been integrated into the *Diakonisches Werk* by 1972. Thus, ASZ was part of the *Diakonisches Werk* and the EKD. The GDR authorities had decided to “delegate the confrontation – henceforth, the state leaves others to discipline.”⁹⁰ After Schmidt had left for Czechoslovakia, state representatives “arrived and naturally put pressure on the EKD and the *Diakonisches Werk* ... state authorities said what they [ASZ] had done, written to Brandt and they did not know anything about it.”⁹¹ Schmidt noted that representatives of the *Diakonisches Werk* and the EKD were “angry that because of us they get in trouble with the

⁸⁷ *Christian Schmidt*: “Da haben wir dann auch eine Solidaritätsadresse an Brandt geschickt und ihm gedankt für sein Dienst und ihm alles Gute gewünscht, es möge weiter gehen, aber das war natürlich für DDR Verhältnisse war das ein Riesending.; Translation: *Christian Schmidt*: “Then we also send a solidarity message to Brandt and thanked him for his service and wished him all the best, may it move on, but naturally for GDR circumstances this was a big deal.”

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ *Christian Schmidt*: “... 'ne Woche später hat mich Dietrich Erdmann abgelöst ... und sagt: In Berlin ist der Teufel los.”; Translation: *Christian Schmidt*: “... one week later Dietrich Erdmann replaced me ... and said: In Berlin all hell is let loose.”

⁹⁰ “Die direkte Konfrontation wird delegiert – fortan lässt der Staat disziplinieren.” in Gabriele Kameroner, *Aktion Sühnezeichen Friedensdienste: Aber man kannes einfach tun*, 144.

⁹¹ *Christian Schmidt*: “Da sind die angekommen und haben ... haben den Bund der Evangelischen Kirchen und Diakonische Werk natürlich unter Druck gesetzt. ... Staat, staatliche Stellen haben gesagt was, was die da gemacht haben, an Brandt geschrieben und die wussten Nichts davon.”; Translation: *Christian Schmidt*: “Thus, they arrived and naturally put pressure on the EKD and the *Diakonisches Werk* ... state authorities said what they had done, written to Brandt and they did not know anything about it.”

state”.⁹² As he was not reprimanded directly by the state authorities, Schmidt did not feel under pressure but “within the church it was difficult because they [*Diakonisches Werk/EKD*] told us don’t do this anymore. Now, they started singing the same tune as the state and said: ‘Keep your hands off’.”⁹³

4.5. Poland

Becoming involved in the Communist neighbor country Poland was one of the big aims both of ASZ and ASF as Lothar Kreyssig had positioned Poland, Israel and Russia as the first three countries that were appropriate to be the hosts for German volunteers who would be willing to set a sign of atonement. It was an arduous process to manage to get into the neighbor country for the East German organization. Although the Oder-Neiße line had been recognized by the Republic of Poland’s and the GDR’s governments via the signing of the Treaty of Görlitz in 1950, the relationship between Warsaw and East Berlin remained strained.⁹⁴ Where to start while political tensions between the former enemies still persisted? Different to the path the ASF leadership chose in the FRG, ASZ would gain access to Poland through the ecumenical partnerships. Especially one person, Günter Särchen, would pave the way for ASZ into Poland. Lothar Kreyssig had encountered Günter Särchen in 1959 and he soon took over responsibility for ASZ’s activities in Poland.⁹⁵ He established the necessary connections outside of the diplomatic forums through his connections to Catholic intellectuals and bishops who were part of the network around the Clubs of

⁹² *Christian Schmidt*: “Also haben sich natürlich geärgert, dass sie unseretwegen Ärger kriegen mit dem Staat.”; Translation: *Christian Schmidt*: “So they were angry that because of us they get in trouble with the state.”

⁹³ *Christian Schmidt*: “... innerkirchlich war es für uns schon schwierig, weil die uns ebenfalls gesagt haben, macht das nicht mehr und so. Also, die haben in das gleiche Horn, wie der Staat geblasen und haben gesagt: ‘Lasst Mal die Finger davon’.”; Translation: *Christian Schmidt*: “... within the church it was difficult because they told us don’t do this anymore. Now, they started singing the same tune as the state and said: ‘Keep your hands off’.”

⁹⁴ Basil Kerski, “Die Rolle nichtstaatlicher Akteure in den deutsch-polnischen Beziehungen vor 1990,” [The role of non-state actors in German-Polish relations before 1990] *Discussions Papers Arbeitsgruppe International Politik* 301 (1999): 16.

⁹⁵ Aktion Sühnezeichen Friedensdienste, *Gegen den Strom*, 100.

Catholic Intellectuals (KIK), the group Znak⁹⁶ and the newspaper Więż and Tygodnik Powszechny. Znak was a Polish Catholic laymen's organization which was part of the Polish parliament *Sejm* from 1956 to 1976. Similarly, KIK was a network for Catholic lay men. On the German side the Catholic bishops of Magdeburg were supporting ASZ's foray into Poland.⁹⁷

However, at first things did not go according to plan when the planned *Pilgerfahrt* came to an end before it even started. For August 1964, it was intended that a group of 40 young GDR citizens would bike for two and a half weeks across Poland to places of former concentration camps. People were ready to go but the relevant authorities did not grant them approval to cross the border into Poland at Görlitz. Yet, the ASZ team simply changed its tactics and in 1965 "with personal invitations they met on the other side, at first they entered individually, then they met on the other side"⁹⁸, Schmidt remembers. The women's group went from Słubice to Poznań to the Warsaw Ghetto and the memorial site in Majdanek while the men's group started in Zgorzelec and passed various memorial sites such as Groß-Rosen and Auschwitz-Birkenau.⁹⁹

Also ASF had become active in Poland, having long-term volunteers stationed in the mayor Polish Holocaust memorials, regularly organizing study trips as well as the construction of the International Youth Meeting Center in Oświęcim (Auschwitz), as Frau Orth remembers. However, usually little contact was possible or wanted between the East German ASZ participants and the West German ASF participants. As Paul Berger recounts when asked about his knowledge about West German ASF's work in Poland he mentioned:

⁹⁶ Translation from Polish: Sign.

⁹⁷ Kerski, "Die Rolle nichtstaatlicher Akteure", 16.

⁹⁸ Christian Schmidt: "... über persönliche Einladung sich drüben getroffen haben, also zunächst einzeln eingereist sind, sich drüben getroffen haben ... "

⁹⁹ Aktion Sühnezeichen Friedensdienste, *Gegen den Strom*, 78.

So, that there was an Action Sign for Reconciliation in the West was known. Well, if it was only known to me but it was not a secret. Yet, they [the West German volunteers] could go to Israel. *Laughs*. And to France and England, yes. Thus, from this point it was totally different story. It was the same founding idea but still totally different. In how far there were activities on Eastern Europe, I don't know.¹⁰⁰

As Susanne Orth later reports, ASF was indeed still very active in Poland. Both Susanne Orth and Paul Berger would work on the same project site, the Warsaw children's hospital, during the 1980s, she in 1980 as part of a study trip to Poland and him as part of a summer camp. On the East German side, the contact to the hospital had been established due to the proposal by Bishop Albrecht Schönherr in the 1970s. The hospital on the outskirts of Warsaw was to be dedicated to the suffering children of WWII. Officially organized through the *Bund der evangelischen Kirchen in der DDR*¹⁰¹ (BEK) these were the only ASZ summer camps that were conducted with official visas.¹⁰²

By the late 1980s, these administrative issues with the GDR's authorities, especially concerning visa regulations, had become more subdued or were not noticeable for the East German participants, as Paul Berger recounts. Paul Berger had long wanted to visit the Polish People's Republic and when asked for his reasons he suggested a variety of motivating factors:

First, the Poles were always made to look bad. So, there were always prejudices. The Poles are stealing and so on. [...] My parents also had friends in Poland. [...] Then in 1980, the *Solidarność* story was one of the first events, political events, that I consciously noticed, and I thought it's great to stand up against those daft Russians. [...] So, I did not manage [...] to get on friendly terms with our occupiers. Thus, this was my prejudice and the Poles who were not like us, who lived to work, but who

¹⁰⁰ Paul Berger: "Also das es Aktion Sühnezeichen auch im Westen gab,... war bekannt. Also, ob es jetzt nur mir bekannt war, aber das war jetzt kein Geheimnis. Aber die durften ja nach Israel. *lacht* Und nach Frankreich und nach England, ja. Also von daher, das war was ganz Anderes. Das war so die gleiche Gründeridee, aber es war eben ... was Anderes. Inwiefern das Engagement in Osteuropa war, weiß ich nicht."

¹⁰¹ Translation: Federation of Protestant Churches in the GDR.

¹⁰² Aktion Sühnezeichen Friedensdienste, *Gegen den Strom*, 105.

worked to live, it was great. Then the border was closed, one could no longer go to Poland and hence, it was just like the West.¹⁰³

Basil Kerski's assessment of the role of ASZ's work in Poland throughout the existence of the two Communist states is very optimistic, as he suggests that outside of state-sanctioned opportunities, ASZ "could assume a key position in the relations between GDR citizens and Poles."¹⁰⁴

5. The Experiences and Work of ASF Members in the FRG

5.1. Introduction

"More than before the last war has awakened a desire for peace in the heart of the people. Reconciliation work by churches received a deep resonance. There are many examples of young people's work for mutual understanding. I am thinking of 'Action Reconciliation Sign' and their activities in Auschwitz and Israel."¹⁰⁵

- Excerpts from a speech by Bundespräsident Richard von Weizsäcker,

May 8th 1985

In 1985 the end of World War II was commemorated worldwide for the 40th time.

As part of the official commemorations organized by the West German government the

¹⁰³ Paul Berger: "Das Eine ist Polen sind ja immer schlecht gemacht worden. Also es gab immer diese Vorurteile. Die Polen klauen und so weiter. [...] meine Eltern hatten auch Freunde in Polen [...]. Dann 1980 die Solidarnoscgeschichte war so eine der ersten Sachen, politischen Sachen, die ich so bewusst auch wahrgenommen habe und ich fand's total klasse diesen bescheuerten Russen die Stirn zu zeigen. [...] Also ich hab [...] keine freundschaftliche Beziehung zu unseren Besatzern aufbauen können. Also das waren meine Vorurteile und jetzt die Polen, die ja sowieso nicht wie wir, gelebt haben um zu arbeiten, sondern gearbeitet haben um zu leben, na, das war einfach klasse. Dann ist ja die Grenze zugemacht worden, man durfte ja nicht mehr nach Polen fahren und deswegen war das einfach, das war wie Westen."

¹⁰⁴ Kerski, "Die Rolle nichtstaatlicher Akteure," 16.

¹⁰⁵ "Stärker als früher hat der letzte Krieg die Friedenssehnsucht im Herzen der Menschen geweckt. Die Versöhnungsarbeit von Kirchen fand eine tiefe Resonanz. Für die Verständigungsarbeit von jungen Menschen gibt es viele Beispiele. Ich denke an die "Aktion Sühnezeichen" mit ihrer Tätigkeit in Auschwitz und Israel." in Richard von Weizsäcker, "Rede von Bundespräsident Richard von Weizsäcker bei der Gedenkveranstaltung im Plenarsaal des Deutschen Bundestages zum 40. Jahrestag des Endes des Zweiten Weltkrieges in Europa" [Speech by Federal President Richard von Weizsäcker at the memorial service at the Chamber of the German Parliament for the 40th anniversary of the end of World War II] on 8 May 1985. <http://www.bundespraesident.de/SharedDocs/Reden/DE/Richard-von-Weizsaecker/Reden/1985/05/19850508_Rede.html;jsessionid=80A0D5A13B98773B1E92A4D7B41BCB6B.2_cid388> (retrieved June 9th 2014).

Federal President Richard von Weizsäcker¹⁰⁶ gave a speech in the German *Bundestag* in Bonn that would pin-point the struggle within the FRG on how World War II and the Holocaust were remembered and the overall debate on *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, that was taking place in the 1980s, was developing. The emotional distance to World War II becomes palatable as the generation of grand-children comes of age which means that steadily the group of direct witnesses of the Third Reich is declining and a renewed period of forgetting is starting.

Most significant for the FRG was the sentence in Weizsäcker's speech that states: "May 8th was a day of liberation. It liberated all of us from the inhuman system of national socialist tyranny."¹⁰⁷ In addition, the President refers in his speech to the work of the West German ASF and its contribution to reconciliation with Poland and Israel which indicates how the organization is perceived by the West German public. The speech was delivered just days after the visit of West German Chancellor Helmut Kohl and US President Ronald Reagan to the military cemetery in Bitburg. The visit had been criticized internally but also abroad as it was not only *Wehrmacht* soldiers who were interned there but also former SS members. For the protesters the visit indicated that "reconciliation had reached the perpetrators, war crimes and the persecution of Jews shall join the ranks of history, Germany is rehabilitated."¹⁰⁸ Also, ASF is critical of the societal shifts that are indicated by the Bitburg visit and wants to react with two initiatives that complement the work of the previous years. The organization supports efforts towards compensations for forced

¹⁰⁶ Richard von Weizsäcker (born 1920) was the 6th Federal President of the FRG from 1984 to 1994.

¹⁰⁷ "Der 8. Mai war ein Tag der Befreiung. Er hat uns alle befreit von dem menschenverachtenden System der nationalsozialistischen Gewaltherrschaft." in Richard von Weizsäcker, "Rede von Bundespräsident Richard von Weizsäcker".

¹⁰⁸ "Die Versöhnung hat auch die Täter erreicht, Kriegsverbrechen und Judenverfolgung sollen ins Glied der Geschichte zurücktreten, Deutschland ist rehabilitiert." in Gabriele Kammerer, *Aktion Sühnezeichen Friedensdienste: Aber man kann es einfach tun*, 191.

labourers and advocates for more local history and commemoration projects, two topics that supplement the already established projects.¹⁰⁹

By the early 1980s, the work of ASF was concentrated on three areas of activism: the reinvigoration of the peace movement against rearmament, the organization of study trips to the memorials and concentration camps in Poland, and the sending of long-term volunteers to a variety of project sites. In terms of international relations, the 1980s began as a tense political period both in the GDR and the FRG. In the GDR, the SED leadership was worried by the on-going strikes in Poland that might inspire similar unrest and protests among the GDR's citizen while the Federal Republic witnessed the invigoration of the peace movement. Throughout the 1980s ASF was an actor in the FRG's debates on disarmament, human rights and historical consciousness. In October 1981, it is one of the co-organizers of what was going to be the largest demonstration in postwar Germany until this point, titled "Acting together against the atomic threat! – For disarmament and détente in Europe." The demonstration in Bonn, the West German capital, was to be the beginning of a movement against the NATO Double-Track Decision from 1979 and the announced deployment of atomic weapons and the overall armaments race.¹¹⁰

The two interviewees who were involved in ASF in the FRG and interviewed for this project, Ulrich Kreßin and Susanne Orth, stand in different relations to this last period of ASF before the organization's reunification in the early 1990s. Ulrich Kreßin had at this point already been involved in ASF for over ten years and been a member of the ASF executive board for periods of time. He is also part of '68 generation who were the first to publicly raise the questions of German guilt and *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* which were now, in the 1980s, challenged and debated again. Susanne Orth was part of the grand-child

¹⁰⁹ Kammerer, *Aktion Sühnezeichen Friedensdienste: Aber man kann es einfach tun*, 192.

¹¹⁰ Kammerer, *Aktion Sühnezeichen Friedensdienste: Aber man kann es einfach tun*, 181.

generation and had no direct memory of the Third Reich. Yet, it was also not the ASF's political activism that attracted her to join the organization. The two interviews that are utilized in his chapter are of particular interest because they complement and contrast the narratives of the ASZ members in the previous chapter. While there was often little contact between the two organizations, they nonetheless influenced each other but were also exposed to different political circumstances and discussions in their respective home countries.

5.2. Kreßin's First Encounter with ASF: Similar Questions

The year 1968 marked great transitions both for ASF as well as the two German republics. While the GDR was oriented towards the East and the events taking place in Czechoslovakia around the Prague Spring, the FRG witnessed the peak of the student uprisings as did most of Western Europe and North America. For ASF, 1968 marked its tenth anniversary and brought a change of status and a new name which meant that the organization became an association on its own with the extended title "Aktion Sühnezeichen/Friedensdienste."¹¹¹ While the change appears minor, it was much more significant for the future direction the West German part was to take by redefining its mandate. The new title implies an extension of the former obligation of atonement that now included an additional focus on peace which became a popular term in this period. To a certain degree, the name change also shows that a "sign of atonement" was an uncomfortable, difficult term to use and needed to be accompanied by another term that better accommodated the changing attitude of dealing with the past that was initiated by the 1968 generation. Last but not least, this differentiates the West German part of the organization from the East-German one as they remained simply *Aktion Sühnezeichen*.¹¹²

¹¹¹ Translation: Action Sign of Atonement/Peace Service.

¹¹² Kammerer, *Aktion Sühnezeichen Friedensdienste: Aber man kann es einfach tun*, 109.

Ulrich Kreßin first encountered ASF via his work in the mid-1960's as a youth and social worker for the Protestant youth welfare service in Charlottenburg, a neighbourhood in Berlin. The office of the *Evangelische Industriejugend*¹¹³, which was located in the Frankenallee, occupied the adjacent property and thus, he met Franz von Hammerstein. Due to a personal interest in the work of ASF, Ulrich Kreßin invited Franz von Hammerstein to give lectures to the young volunteer youth workers Ulrich Kreßin was training. His personal motivation to address his family's involvement and actions in the Third Reich fuelled his interest in ASF's work. In his recapitulations Ulrich Kreßin sees his motivation in terms of the "1968 generation" when he refers to "our generation" and "us" as he is describing his reasons to become involved in ASF:

I began to become interested because personally [...] I had a need for [answers], the old questions of our generation. 'Where was my father actually [at this time]?' [...] My father was in the party¹¹⁴, was in the administration, had a position here in Charlottenburg and because there were no conversations, this interested me intensely. 'How did this actually happen?', 'How did it come to this?' I also felt in my family, a little bit of a latent anti-Semitism [and] this upset us as young people so that the interest in 'Sign of Atonement' and the processing of history started there.¹¹⁵

Ulrich Kreßin, who belongs to the same generation as Friedrich Magirus and Christian Schmidt, shows a very different, more personal motivation to join the activities of ASF. His motivation to address his family's past and what he considers the questions of his generation carried him even beyond his activism with ASF and motivated him to become

¹¹³ Translation: Protestant Industrial Youth. Full name was *Amt für Industrie- und Sozialarbeit – Evangelische Industriejugend*. In the 1950s established by the Protestant Church in Germany to reestablish connections with the working class and working-class youth. See: Legerer, *Tatort: Versöhnung*, 112-121.

¹¹⁴ Party in this context refers to the *Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei* (National Socialist German Workers' Party – NSDAP).

¹¹⁵ Ulrich Kreßin: "Ich begann mich zu interessieren [...] ich persönlich auch so einen Nachholbedarf hatte, die alte Frage unserer Generation. 'Wo War eigentlich mein Vater [...] in dieser Zeit?' Mein Vater war in der Partei, war in der Verwaltung, hatte 'ne Position hier in Charlottenburg und da es keine Gespräche gab, interessierte mich das brennend. 'Wie ist das eigentlich gewesen?' 'Wie konnte es dazu kommen?' Ich habe auch in meiner Familie so gespürt, so 'n latenten Antisemitismus [...] das regnete uns als junge Leute sehr auf, so dass das Interesse mit der ... mit Sühnezeichen und der Aufarbeitung der Geschichte da angefangen hat. "

involved in various other initiatives in Berlin that address the commemoration of the Third Reich, primarily the church's role in national socialism. In addition to his personal quest for answers, Ulrich Kreßin was very impressed by a summer camp of the *Evangelische Industriejugend* of Franz von Hammerstein which he joined in summer 1968 in Terezín in Czechoslovakia just weeks before the escalation of the Prague Spring. Although he wanted to return to Terezín with a group of young volunteers again this was not possible as ASF and the *Evangelische Industriejugend* were "considered anti-social, detrimental for the state."¹¹⁶ Instead, Ulrich Kreßin took an ASF summer camp group to a former concentration camp. The experience of working at one of the most symbolic sites of the German crimes during the Third Reich was deeply moving for the young man: "This was then the actually formative. We met a former inmate [...] [who] accompanied us and so we got into this ... well ... maelstrom, yes. The personal experience. We worked in the ruins of the gas chambers, we worked in the archive. Oh well, it was a memorable event. Since then this has not lost its hold on me."¹¹⁷

Also Susanne Orth, who is the other interviewee with an ASF perspective, would go to the memorial site in Auschwitz as part of an ASF group almost two decades later. Yet, while the experience of being in Auschwitz was emotionally touching for her, her motivation to stay with the organization was much less motivated by her personal interest to atone for a past that she had no individual memory of.

¹¹⁶ Ulrich Kreßin: "anti-sozial, schädlich dem Staat eingeschätzt."

¹¹⁷ Ulrich Kreßin: "... das war eigentlich das Prägende dann. Wir haben einen ehemaligen Häftling kennengelernt, [...] [der] hat uns begleitet und also da sind wir ... ja, ... hineingekommen in diesen ganzen Strudel, ja. Die persönlichen Erfahrungen. Wir haben an den Ruinen der Gaskammern gearbeitet, wir haben im Archiv gearbeitet. Na ja, es ist ein sehr einprägsames Erlebnis. Seitdem hat mich das nicht mehr losgelassen."

5.3. Orth's First Encounter with ASF: Political Tourism in Auschwitz?

In most circumstances, the Auschwitz memorial site is not referred to as a place for political tourism. Officially opened in 1947 as a “State Museum Oświęcim-Brzezinka”, the museum and memorial complex is one of the most visited “attractions” in Poland. As such the site has been fulfilling a variety of functions such as offering space for commemoration, mourning, education but also activism. The label “political tourism” for the type of memorial trips ASF and *Falken*¹¹⁸ organized was suggested by the Jonathan Huener in his research on the two groups’ activism in Auschwitz in the 1960s and 1970s.¹¹⁹

Susanne Orth first encountered ASF through her church congregation where she joined a church group on a trip to Poland in summer 1980 that included a visit to the former concentration camp and memorial site Auschwitz and voluntary work at the Warsaw children’s hospital’s construction site. In addition, Poland was an interesting destination for the West German teenager as the neighbour country was in the middle of numerous strikes. In order to prepare for the trip, the heterogeneous group prepared by discussing German history, especially Auschwitz and the Holocaust. Susanne Orth’s mother had emigrated from the GDR to the FRG and hence, she felt that she was to a certain extent emotionally prepared to visit a Communist society. In retrospective, she says:

Basically, I was actually pleasantly surprised because I felt the GDR to be much more closed and careful and Poles, they just spoke much more freely, so I think they had less fear maybe because it was the summer 1980 where much came up but I had the feeling in Poland, although I did not speak the language, there was more communication than during our visits to the GDR.¹²⁰

¹¹⁸ Colloquial name of the *Sozialistische Jugend Deutschlands* [Socialist Youth of Germany]. Founded in 1947 the organization was an attempt to invigorate prewar socialist youth groups. See: Jonathan Huener, “Antifascist Pilgrimage and Rehabilitation at Auschwitz: The Political Tourism of Aktion Sühnezeichen und Sozialistische Jugend,” *German Studies Review* 24, no.3 (2001): 516.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁰ Susanne Orth: “Ich war im Grunde genommen eigentlich angenehm überrascht, weil ich die DDR doch sehr viel geschlossener empfunden habe und vorsichtiger und die Polen, die ... haben einfach sehr viel freier

Susanne Orth, who similar to Paul Berger belonged to a much younger generation than the other interviewees, was less motivated to join ASF due to the questions she had concerning her parents' past as had previously been a key question of the '68 generation Ulrich Kreßin considered himself part of. For her, the motivation to join the study trip was two-fold:

Let me say it like this, there was not that much on offer in our village. [...] [There was] the interest in getting to know something else, outside of the GDR, of course also the visit to the memorial site, as I think I had not yet visited one in Germany. I cannot remember that we had visited anything, not that I am aware of, that's why the visit to Auschwitz was such a strong shock for me [...] it knocked me off my feet, yes, it very much knocked me off my feet.¹²¹

As Susanne Orth describes she was interested to join the memorial trip by ASF for the entertainment and only on second thought emphasizes her interest in those parts that dealt with history and commemoration. Susanne Orth also accentuates again how interested she was in the political changes the study trip group witnessed and experienced in Poland during that summer:

[The] approach of the memorial excursions simply appealed to me, so also the historical [aspects], not only to go to the east to look what transformation processes were taking place, which of course I also found exciting, the changing society which at this point in the '80ies one did not know any more in Western Germany.¹²²

gesprochen, also hatten glaub ich weniger Ängste, vielleicht war's auch der Sommer *ehm* 1980, wo ebenso Vieles aufbrach, aber ich hatte das Gefühl in Polen, obwohl ich der Sprache nicht mächtig war, lief mehr Kommunikation als [...] bei unseren DDR Besuchen."

¹²¹ *Susanne Orth*: "Ich sag Mal so viel Angebote gab's jetzt nicht bei uns im Dorf [...] schon das Interesse was Anderes kennenzulernen außerhalb der DDR hat mich gereizt, natürlich [...] auch in die Gedenkstätte zu fahren, ich glaub zu dem Zeitpunkt ich hab keine besucht in Deutschland. Ich kann mich nicht erinnern, dass wir irgendwas besucht hätten, nicht dass ich wüsste, deshalb war das auch ein glatter Schock für mich dieser Besuch in Auschwitz ... hat mich umgehauen, ja hat mich sehr umgehauen."

¹²² *Susanne Orth*: "[Der] Ansatz dieser Gedenkstättenfahrt, [...] der hat mir einfach zugesagt, also auch diese historischen [Aspekte], also jetzt nicht nur Richtung Osten zu gehen um zu gucken was passiert an Transformationsprozessen, das fand ich natürlich auch spannend, die Gesellschaft in Bewegung, das kannte man so in Westdeutschland zu dem Zeitpunkt nicht mehr in den 80er Jahren."

Interestingly, although ASF was one of the main organizers for this type of study trips to Poland until 1989, Susanne Orth remembered that she was not aware of the organisation's involvement during the trip. She knew that the concept of such memorial trips as she participated in had been initiated by ASF but was more concerned with her new found interest in Poland which motivated her to apply for a position as an ASF volunteer for a two year service at a Polish memorial site following her high school graduation a few years later. As Susanne Orth describes her situation during that time, it is clear that she wanted to go to Poland and did not consider joining one of the other projects in France, the Netherlands or Norway. She was eventually placed in at the memorial site Majdanek near Lublin in Eastern Poland in 1982.

Despite Poland's geographical proximity to Germany, both parts of *Aktion Sühnezeichen* struggled to get a foot on the ground in Poland for a variety of reasons but gained different forms of access after the organizational split of the group into ASF and ASZ. Although the intention to start work in Poland had been expressively stated in Kreyssig's *Gründungsaufwurf*, groups of ASZ and ASF were denied entry to Poland until 1965/1967. Already since 1958, Lothar Kreyssig was aware that the Polish authorities were reluctant to cooperate. ASF in West Berlin opted for a direct approach that involved contact with Polish governmental and administrative organisations while ASZ, with the suggestion of Lothar Kreyssig, tried to get in contact with the Polish Catholic church. Yet, Volker Törne argued against involving the Polish Catholic church due to the strained church-state relations, stating that "the difficult relationship between the Polish government and the Catholic church in Poland should not be affected by the German side in a way that could lead to possible disgruntlement on the government's side."¹²³ Ultimately, in the case of

¹²³ "Das schwierige Verhältnis zwischen der polnischen Regierung und der katholischen Kirche in Polen darf von deutscher Seite nicht in einer Weise berührt werden, die zu möglicher Verstimmung auf

ASZ, the rejection to grant visas to the East German volunteers was due to a request by the Ministry for Foreign Affairs of the GDR. Yet, in 1965 a group of ASZ was able to obtain visas to Poland and participate in an atonement pilgrimage, although this did not take place within the official networks between Poland and the GDR. ASF was officially granted permission to start work in the People's Republic of Poland in 1967. Yet, this was under the clear order from the Polish side that no East German citizens were allowed to join the groups or initiate their own mission to Poland.¹²⁴

When she was a volunteer in Majdanek, Susanne Orth remembers that the “commemoration in Poland always had something heroic and the heroization of the victims and the fighters and so on. [...] This should also have its place and today I find that because this part of history is not so much politically instrumentalized anymore, there is more space for the actual mourning.”¹²⁵ Yet, when asked if she ever commented on the heroization that she observed at the memorial she makes clear that she was not in a position to do so as a young volunteer from another country and states “I certainly did not challenge anything there ... that I would not have found that reaction appropriate.”¹²⁶

Following her time as an ASF volunteer in Majdanek, Susanne Orth returns to Germany to continue her studies in Berlin where she also worked as a part-time assistant in the ASF office throughout the 1980s. From 1995 to 2000 she returns to Poland and works in the International Youth Meeting Centre Oświęcim. It was here that she herself notices the generational differences in relating to the Third Reich and its memories which she does not

regierungsamtlicher Seite führen könnte.” Von Törne an Kreyssig, dat. 11. Juni 1963, EZA 97/45. In Legerer, *Tatort: Versöhnung*, 229.

¹²⁴ Kammerer, *Aktion Sühnezeichen Friedensdienste: Aber man kann es einfach tun*, 53.

¹²⁵ *Susanne Orth*: “Erinnern in Polen hatte immer was sehr Heroisches und die Heroisierung der Opfer und auch der Kämpfer etcetera. [...] Das soll auch seinen Platz haben und heute finde ich, dadurch dass das nicht mehr so öh politisch instrumentalisiert wird dieser Teil der Geschichte, ist auch mehr Platz da, ich finde für die eigentliche Trauer.”

¹²⁶ *Susanne Orth*: “Ich hab da bestimmt nichts hinterfragt ... hätt ich mir auch nicht angemaßt. ”

draw between herself and previous generations such as the other interviewees but between her generation and the following generation. She feels that

[in] my generation there is still the debate with the grandparents. My parents were children, who were born in the '30ies [...] which means this was [...] a very alive piece of family history. Thus, the following generation that came next already knew this more through the movie "Schindler's List" than through family history, as I noticed. [...] It is a different approach and while our generation frequently spoke about, let's say, guilt and atonement, this became a more distant [...] question on genocide in the following generation.¹²⁷

Susanne Orth notices a difference in the way the following generation relates to the past because they do not have access to the same, first-hand memories that she had in her family. However, at the same time her narration of her involvement with ASF indicates a similar distance to the memory of the Third Reich and the Holocaust when compared to the reported memories of the other four older interviewees.

Concerning the specific, religious terminology that ASF already includes in its name, Susanne Orth was more distant towards terms such as atonement. For her, this was something that was not part of her everyday language. Yet, she could not think of a better term to describe the work ASF and the volunteers were doing. Ultimately, she expresses her consensus with the ASF terminology. She recalls that

already during preparation [for the volunteer service], there were fierce discussions [...] and at the end of each discussion we realized there is no better term that expresses especially this. Even if it is, let me say it like that, an antiquated language. [...] There were many discussions, also intergenerational, which I found exciting and ultimately we realized again and again 'No, this term fits.' and now with the addition 'peace service,' it expresses at its heart exactly

¹²⁷ *Susanne Orth*: "meine Generation das ist ja doch noch die Auseinandersetzung mit den Großeltern. Meine Eltern waren als Kinder, die waren in den 30ern geboren [...] das heißt, das war [...] ein sehr lebendiges Stück Familiengeschichte. Also die nächste Generation, die dann kam da hab ich schon gemerkt, die kennen das schon mehr durch den Film 'Schindlers Liste' als jetzt durch Familiengeschichte. Das ist schon ein anderer Zugang und während unsere Generation vielfach wirklich über, ich sag Mal, Schuld und Sühne geredet hat [...] bekam das mit der nächsten Generation eine distanziertere [...] Frage nach Völkermord ..."

what was my also my concern and insofar [...] I still have a strong identification with that.¹²⁸

While ASF was often accused of having strayed too far from the religious foundations and motivation of the organization, for Susanne Orth this was still present in the work, as she expresses:

I got there through the congregational work. I am not standing outside of the church now; it was an important institution especially in my young years. [...] In Poland I did not feel any of it in a sense. One noticed it of course every time we had a meeting. There, it always started with a church service and a small meditation in the morning.¹²⁹

Although the religiosity of ASF was not something she noticed during her volunteer service, which she did far away from the ASF office in West Berlin, she nonetheless would not say that ASF left its religious traditions behind.

5.3. Finding a New Path: Volunteers in Israel

Since Kreyssig's appeal for the founding of ASF in 1958, Israel had been one of the countries the organization was most interested in working with as Israel represented the new home for those who had suffered the most under national socialism. Questioned if he noticed a competition between the activities at some point during his work with ASF, namely did the support of the West German peace movement distract the organisation from its work towards reconciliation and ideal to atone for the Third Reich, Ulrich Kreßin states that this was not the case in his opinion. However, tensions arose within the ASF board

¹²⁸ *Susanne Orth*: "während der Vorbereitung [für den Freiwilligendienst] schon, heftige Diskussionen gegeben und [...] am Ende jeder Diskussion haben wir festgestellt es gibt keine besseren Begriff der das genau ausdrückt. Auch wenn's ein bisschen, sag ich Mal, so 'ne antiquierte Sprache ist. [...] Da hat's viele Diskussionen zu gegeben, auch generationsübergreifend, was ich spannend fand und letztendlich haben wir immer wieder festgestellt "Nein, der Begriff passt." und jetzt auch durch die Ergänzung 'Friedensdienste', also es drückt im Grunde genommen genau das aus was auch mein Anliegen war und [...] insofern ... ich hab da auch nach wie vor schon 'ne große Identifizierung mit."

¹²⁹ *Susanne Orth*: "Ich bin durch die Gemeindegarbeit dazugekommen. Ich stehe jetzt nicht außerhalb der Kirche; sie war eine wichtige Institution, besonders in meinen jungen Jahren. [...] In Polen habe ich in gewisser Weise nichts davon gespürt. Man bemerkte es natürlich jedes Mal, wenn wir ein Treffen hatten. Das fing immer mit einem Gottesdienst und einer kleinen Morgenandacht an."

concerning ASF's work in Israel. As he puts it, the tensions within the organisation mirrored in parts issues of the FRG's political left. Ulrich Kreßin says:

The tensions [between] part of the peace movement and also a very critical stance towards Israel in parts of the [political] left sometimes played a role in [ASF]. There were conflicts concerning the participation of [ASF] volunteers in Arabic projects, who naturally strongly worked towards their rights, and in those projects that were chosen by Israel particularly for us, such as the care for Holocaust survivors in elderly homes [...]. Sometimes we had these questions in the board: 'Shall we do the classical reconciliation work with people harmed by the Holocaust or shall we also include the current problems [of the] Arabs [...]?''. This caused conflict in the managing board, that's true.¹³⁰

However, the issue of how the ideals of ASF could be expressed in the volunteer's work in Israel was not only an issue at the ASF office in West Berlin but was a major obstacle for the volunteers who actually served in Israel. On the one hand, the young West Germans tried to establish their own stance towards Israel with their awareness of the German responsibility for the crimes of the Holocaust. On the other hand, many of them witnessed on a daily basis the discrimination and mistreatment of the Palestinians and did not agree with it.¹³¹ Yet, how could ASF as a whole and the young volunteers be critical of what was happening in Israel when they were there to atone for the deeds of their grand-parents?

5.4. Meeting the Other Side: Contact and Personal Encounters with ASZ

Despite their physical division, the two parts of the organization stayed in contact throughout the early 1960s to late 1980s. Although it was nearly impossible for the East

¹³⁰ Ulrich Kreßin: "Die Spannungen noch ein bisschen Friedensbewegung und auch 'ne sehr Israel-kritische Haltung in manchen Teilen der Linken, die spielte auch bei Sühnezeichen Mal rein. Es gab Konflikte mit der Beteiligung von Sühnezeichenfreiwilligen in arabischen Projekten, die ja sehr massiv natürlich auch auf ihre Rechte hingearbeitet haben und in den Projekten, die von, von Israel besonders für uns vorgesehen waren, also die Pflege von Holocaustüberlebenden in den Altersheimen und da war dann, manchmal kamen wir im Vorstand auch auf solche Fragen: "Sollen wir klassischerweise Versöhnungsarbeit mit Israel mit Holocaustgeschädigten Menschen machen oder auch die gegenwärtige Problematik Araber und so aufnehmen?". Und da gab's auch Streit im Vorstand, das stimmt."

¹³¹ Legerer, *Tatort: Versöhnung*, 223.

German ASZ members to gain legal access to the FRG, a series of other options for personal meetings between the two parts of the organization were available. Considering that it was possible for FRG citizens to obtain visa to the GDR, individual ASF members, especially those based in West Berlin, were able to visit the office in East Berlin. In addition, it was possible for FRG citizens and foreigners to participate in the summer camps organized by ASZ in the GDR and abroad.¹³² Even though these possibilities were available, the contact between the two organizations according to the two West German interviewees was not as intense as would have been possible. Romi Romberg however ascertains that regular contact with West Berlin was maintained albeit difficulties shortly after the German division. She remembers that

The contact was always good, those who could come over came over. There were a lot who were not West Berliners, they could come over any time and the *Präsens* [Lothar Kreyssig] could not for the first years of the Wall. So, probably until '63, '64 the lights were off because when I moved here [East Berlin] around Christmas '63 the passes were actually just issued. There was nothing in the two years prior. Plus, there was no telephone [service] between East and West, not for many, many, years. However, the contact was nonetheless maintained through couriers. For decades in the West Berlin office was an intern from England or respectively the USA and they could always cross the border and they were always in our office for one day a week.¹³³

Ulrich Kreßin's perspective, who was a member of the ASF board, summarizes his contact with the East German side of the organization as follows:

"The contact existed because sometimes individuals from the board [...] went to the meetings and sometimes to the annual meeting in Weißensee. I was there

¹³² According to ASF e. V. ASZ summer camps were attended by volunteers from France, the Netherlands, and Great Britain in the 1960s. This became more difficult due to more challenging visa requirements. See: Aktion Sühnezeichen Friedensdienste, *Gegen den Strom*, 18.

¹³³ Romi Romberg: "Der Kontakt war immer gut, wer rüberkommen konnte kam rüber. Da war'n ja ganz viele, die keine West-Berliner waren, die konnten ja jeder Zeit rüber und der Präsens konnte die ersten Mauerjahre natürlich nicht. Also bis '63, '64 war da wahrscheinlich alles zappenduster, denn als ich hierher zog Weihnachten '63 sind die ersten Passierscheine überhaupt ausgegeben worden. Die zwei Jahre davor war eben nichts. Und Telefon gab's ja auch nicht zwischen Ost- und West, lange, lange Jahre nicht. Aber die haben den Kontakt trotzdem immer durch Kuriere aufrechterhalten. Im West-Berliner Büro war über Jahrzehnte hinweg immer ein Praktikant aus England, beziehungsweise USA und die konnten ja immer über die Grenze und die waren immer einen Tag in der Woche in unserm Büro."

only once [...] My contact with the East Berlin side was rather with the branch of the Protestant cooperation in East Berlin.”¹³⁴

So, Ulrich Kreßin did make use of the possibility of entering East Berlin, yet, according to his own memory attended only one of the *Jahrestreffen*, which had an important function in the set-up of ASZ. Ulrich Kreßin also explains that it was not always an easy process to cross the border into East Berlin:

At the border it had also happened to me [that] one [had brought] materials of ‘Sign for Atonement’ along ... and then one had to wait, then one had to wait and then someone came who apparently was especially informed, well, and he asked you then ‘What is this?’ and ‘What are you doing there?’ and wanted to know everything in detail, knew the people, knew the names Hammerstein and other, Kreyssig, and somehow this rang a bell with the GDR people at the border sometimes.¹³⁵

Ulrich Kreßin expresses this story in form of an anecdote that relays neither fear of nor annoyance with the GDR authorities. While it is understandable that a very close contact between the two organizations was hindered by the political tensions of the Cold War and the administrative limits of visa regulations, it is still surprising to observe how indistinct the contact between the two parts played out. This observation was not only expressed in comments made by Ulrich Kreßin but was also articulated in an interview with Wolfgang Brinkel, ASF’s director from 1982 to 1987, who claimed for himself to be “the first who intensified the contact with ‘Sign of Atonement’ in the GDR and was regularly at the [ASZ] board meetings.”¹³⁶ In the end, we cannot determine how much contact was feasible for the two organizations but we can see that the character of that contact is remembered differently

¹³⁴ Ulrich Kreßin: “Der [Kontakt] bestand dadurch, dass manchmal Einzelne vom Vorstand [...] hingefahren sind zu den Sitzungen, auch Mal zu den [...] Jahrestreffen in Weißensee. [Da] war ich aber nur einmal, also [...] meine Berührung mit Ost-Berliner Seite waren [...] in meiner hauptberuflichen Zeit als Bildungsreferent eher mit dem Zweig der evangelischen Mitarbeit in Ost-Berlin.”

¹³⁵ Ulrich Kreßin: “Mir ist das dann auch passiert an der Grenze, [dass] man Unterlagen von Sühnezeichen dabei [hatte]... und dann durfte man warten, dann durfte man warten und dann kam jemand der wohl besonders informiert war, ja, und fragte einen denn „Was ist denn das?“ und „Was machen wir denn da?“ und wollten genau wissen, kannten die Leute, kannten die Namen Hammerstein und andere und Kreyssig und also da klingelten irgendwie an den Grenzen bei den DDR Leute manchmal so Warnsignale.”

¹³⁶ “der Erste, der die Kontakte zu Sühnezeichen in der DDR intensivierte und unter anderem regelmäßig bei Leitungssitzungen war.” in Aktion Sühnezeichen Friedensdienste, *Gegen den Strom*, 56.

among the ASF and ASZ members.

5.5. Confrontation in Poland: International Youth Meeting Centre Oświęcim

The International Youth Meeting Centre in Oświęcim (IYMCO) that exists until today has become one of the major reference points for ASF e. V.'s current work. Situated in close proximity to the former *Konzentrationslager Auschwitz*, it was one of the most prestigious and challenging projects of ASF in the 1980s. Prestigious because it would be an official and institutionalized place to implement ASF's ideals in a foreign and Communist country, something ASZ still struggled with, and challenging because the project was conceptualized before the signing of the Warsaw Treaty and influenced by the different political interests of the FRG and Poland. As Susanne Orth describes it, in order to "keep things going" and for the IYMCO to open in 1986, "one of course had to work together with many governmental places."¹³⁷ For her, the consequence "if one would have said 'we don't do it,' [this] would have been it, we would have been kicked out as well. One went for the compromise, yes, okay we have to swallow the bitter pill, in order to have at least three volunteers in Poland."¹³⁸

Besides ASF and the Protestant churches, various institutions were involved in the planning and construction phase, such as the German Foreign Office, the German Ministry responsible for Youth, the Polish government in Warsaw, the regional representatives of Oświęcim, the Polish Ecumenical Council and the Society of Fighters for Freedom and Democracy.¹³⁹ The problems of gaining approval for the project both in the FRG and the Communist Polish Republic exemplified the political tensions among the two states as well

¹³⁷ Susanne Orth: "natürlich musste man da mit vielen staatlichen Stellen zusammenarbeiten."

¹³⁸ Susanne Orth: "wenn man gesagt hätte 'man macht's nicht', wäre [es das] gewesen wir wären da auch rausgeflogen. Diesen Kompromiss ist man eingegangen, ja, okay in diesen Apfel müssen wir dann in diesen sauren Apfel müssen wir beißen, dass wir mindestens noch drei Freiwillige haben in Polen."

¹³⁹ Legerer, *Tatort: Versöhnung*, 237.

as among the two German organizations ASF and ASZ. In the process ASF would have to accommodate with the Polish political set-up and as Susanne Orth recapitulates “[...] the question is, was it worth it or not? It is debatable.”¹⁴⁰

Although Lothar Kreyssig had already suggested the idea to “build an ecumenical site for meeting and commemoration”¹⁴¹ in 1967, it would take sixteen years of official negotiations (1970 to 1986) to finally start building a seminar building and two living quarters for ca. 4.2 million German Mark.¹⁴² First concrete steps were taken in 1970 when Volker Törne meets the director of the International Auschwitz Committee’s Warsaw office. Anton Legerer states that these first negotiations with the official Polish representatives “accord ASF with a pioneering role in the FRG-Poland relations”¹⁴³ as these took place prior to the signing of the *Ostverträge* which to a certain extent normalized the diplomatic relations between the FRG and Poland. In reference to December 7th 1970 when the Treaty of Warsaw was signed, the IYMCO was officially opened on December 7th 1986. The Treaty of Warsaw was significant for the relations between the FRG and Poland as it stipulated that the FRG would recognize the Polish borders in their current state. The signing of the treaties was preceded by the Warsaw Genuflection by Chancellor Willy Brandt and is seen as part of the larger New Eastern Policy that Brandt pursued. However, the significance of the IYMCO for the actual reconciliation and rapprochement between the FRG and Poland in the first years of its existence and the last years of Communist Poland is contested. A field report from 1997 which recapitulates these first years, states that the IYMCO was seen “more as a landmark of the West than a landmark for reconciliation.”¹⁴⁴

¹⁴⁰ Susanne Orth: “[...] die Frage ist war’s das wert oder nicht? Kann man drüber streiten.”

¹⁴¹ “oekumenische Stätte der Begegnung und des Gedenkens zu bauen” in Legerer, *Tatort: Versöhnung*, 236.

¹⁴² Kammerer, *Aktion Sühnezeichen Friedensdienste: Aber man kann es einfach tun*, 198.

¹⁴³ “so kommt der Aktion Sühnezeichen im Verhältnis BRD-Polen eine Vorreiterrolle zu” in Legerer, *Tatort: Versöhnung*, 237.

¹⁴⁴ Marek Frysztański, “Experience and reflections on the work of the Auschwitz International Youth Meeting Centre.” In *Reconciliation between East and West? Christian Reconciliatory Activity – Opportunities and*

Overall, Susanne Orth remembered little personal contact with the ASZ office in the GDR as well as meeting East German members. However, in her private life as a student in West Berlin she maintained friendships in the Communist part of the city that she could access. Of her friends, she recounts that “all of them were active and part of *Neues Forum*, [...] *Zionskirche* and *Gethsemanekirche*”.¹⁴⁵

6. Conclusions

Similar to the two German republics the two *Aktion Sühnezeichen* organizations also had to consider what to do after the fall of the Berlin Wall on November 9th 1989 opened up the possibility for an rapprochement or even reunification. Yet, reactions on both sides of the organization were less than joyous. Already in December 1989, the ASF initiated a demonstration in West Berlin where ca. 10.000 people demonstrated against “*Großdeutschland*” or the creation of one large German state. Yet, this appears not to offend the East German ASZ and both sides of the organization come to the agreement that “cooperation yes, merging no”¹⁴⁶ was to be the path of ASZ-ASF relations in the preceding months. Yet, time went by faster than the two partners expected and already by May 1, 1990 there was only one German *Aktion Sühnezeichen*.¹⁴⁷ Finally, the almost forty-year long division had come to an end. Of the six interviewees only Romi Romberg, Ulrich Kreßin and Susanne Orth were still close enough to the organization to notice the difficult rapprochement between two very different organizations.

The newly formed ASF e. V. did not only have to deal with the financial and administrative details of the merger but needed to address both questions of the past and the

Conditions, edited by Harry Neyer (Bonn: Justitia et Pax, 1998), 106; See also: Legerer, *Tatort Versöhnung*, 240.

¹⁴⁵ Susanne Orth: “alle waren engagiert und Teil des Neuen Forums, [...] *Zionskirche* und der *Gethsemanekirche*”.

¹⁴⁶ “Zusammenarbeit ja, Zusammengehen nein.” in Kammerer, *Aktion Sühnezeichen Friedensdienste: Aber man kann es einfach tun*, 221.

¹⁴⁷ Kammerer, *Aktion Sühnezeichen Friedensdienste: Aber man kann es einfach tun*, 222.

future. On the one side was ASZ which was never able to fulfill Lothar Kreyssig's initial vision of offering long-term volunteer opportunities abroad and appears to have stuck much closer to its religious roots in the Protestant church than ASF. On the other side was ASF which had not only changed its name in the process but had distanced itself from the church and had been much more politically outspoken than its East German counterpart. Now, over two decades have passed since the end of the GDR and effectively of ASZ. The memories that have been chosen by the interviewees to be shared with the interviewer are pieces in the interviewees' larger life story which is a narrative that reflects on the interviewees' past but also indicates their interpretation of their past. These interpretations have been influenced by various factors, among them the discussions that took place between the members of ASZ and ASF. One of the issues that became contentious was for example the way in which both branches of *Aktion Sühnezeichen* gained access to Poland. While ASZ developed its ecumenical network with the help of Günther Särchen and worked in Poland without much direct contact with the authorities, ASF took the official route, working very closely with the Polish authorities. This leaves room for members to interpret each other's activities in various ways, among them collaboration, accommodation or non-conformism. Again, this interpretation can change throughout an individual's life and appears to depend to a large extent on contemporary challenges. For example, Friedrich Magirius, who is still publicly challenged for the presentation of his past involvement in the Leipzig opposition movement, strongly emphasizes the freedom ASZ and to a larger extent the Protestant church was able to provide. Yet, this leaves behind those instances where church members had to or wanted to collaborate with the state.

What is noticeable when looking at all six interviews as a whole is that we can see a generational development that is manifest in both wings of the organization and has also been explicitly noticed by Susanne Orth. Those interviewees who were young enough to

have coherent childhood memories of World War II, such as Christian Schmidt, Ulrich Kreßin, and Friedrich Magirius still related to the sign of atonement very directly while for a younger generation, Paul Berger and Susanne Orth, the initial motivation to become members in an organization that addresses the past was to enjoy a trip abroad or finding new friends. Today, the lack of a generational memory becomes an issue for the contemporary ASF e. V. because most of its members are three or four generations removed from individual memory of the Third Reich. Although the notion of atonement and setting a sign for a past that is not ours has already been difficult to accept throughout ASZ and ASF's existence, it has become even more difficult for a generation that relies on collective memory as taught in school to accept as their cause.

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