

Handout

Voices in the Dark

Directions: As you are reading, annotate the text by completing the following steps:

1. Circle words that are unfamiliar.
2. Put a question mark (?) in the margin in places where you feel confused.
3. Answer the questions that follow the text.

Life in Weimar Germany was often unpredictable, as a former soldier, Henry Buxbaum, discovered one evening in the early 1920s:

The train was pitch-dark. The lights were out, nothing uncommon after the war when the German railroads were in utter disrepair and very few things functioned orderly. . . . That night, we were seven or eight people in the dark, fourth-class compartment, sitting in utter silence till one of the men started the usual refrain: "Those God-damned Jews, they are at the root of all our troubles." Quickly, some of the others joined in. I couldn't see them and had no idea who they were, but from their voices they sounded like younger men. They sang the same litany over and over again, blaming the Jews for everything that has gone wrong with Germany and for anything else wrong in this world. It went on and on, a cacophony of obscenities, becoming more vicious and at the same time more unbearable with each new sentence echoing in my ears. Finally, I couldn't stand it any longer. I knew very well that to start up with them would get me into trouble, and that to answer them wasn't exactly the height of wisdom, but I couldn't help it. . . . I began naturally with the announcement: "Well, I am a Jew and etc., etc." That was the signal they needed. Now they really went after me, threatening me physically. I didn't hold my tongue as the argument went back and forth. They began jostling me till one of them . . . probably more encouraged by the darkness than by his own valor, suggested: "Let's throw the Jew out of the train." Now, I didn't dare ignore this signal, and from then on I kept quiet. I knew that silence for the moment was better than falling under the wheels of a moving train. One of the men in our compartment, more vicious in his attacks than the others, got off the train with me in Friedburg. When I saw him under the dim light of the platform, I recognized him as a fellow I knew well from our soccer club. . . . I would never have suspected this man of harboring such rabid, antisemitic feelings.¹

Buxbaum's experience would not have been uncommon in Germany in the 1920s. Antisemitic conspiracy theories abounded in post-war Germany, permeating all the way to the highest levels of government. In 1919, Erich Ludendorff, one of Germany's top military leaders, falsely claimed that Jews were one of several groups responsible for the nation's defeat. As proof, he cited the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, a document supposedly containing the minutes of a secret meeting of Jewish leaders. At that supposed meeting, the "Elders" allegedly plotted to take over the world. In fact, the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* is a forgery; Russian secret police wrote it in the early 1900s to incite hatred against Jews.

¹ Henry Buxbaum, "Recollections," in *Jewish Life in Germany: Memoirs from Three Centuries*, ed. Monika Richarz, trans. Stella P. Rosenfeld and Sidney Rosenfeld (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 303-04.

