Technische Universität Dresden

Remembrance of a Different Kind

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Elisa Böhm, a teacher at a secondary school in Dresden, must decide how to handle the information that Finn, the popular student council president, belongs to far-right groups, just before he is scheduled to deliver the keynote address at the May 8 commemoration ceremony.

Elisa Böhm has lived in Dresden since her college days. She has been working as a teacher at a secondary school in the Dresden city area for four years now. The city is especially beautiful in spring: everything is in bloom and the streets are bustling. While she is walking past a lamppost, Ms. Böhm notices a sticker: "May 8–Day of Remembrance!"[1] it reads, in white letters on a black background. She is puzzled: Day of Remembrance? She knows this date as the Day of Liberation. A faint sense of unease creeps over her. Since moving to Dresden, Ms. Böhm has been witnessing an increasingly visible right-wing to far-right scene: stickers like this one with problematic content keep appearing around the city, right-wing hooligans engage in riots on the sidelines of Dynamo[2] soccer matches and demonstrations against immigration openly call for the preservation of the "Christian West" and for "remigration."[3] More and more often she sees black sweatshirts with runic symbols, Fraktur-style prints or Thor Steinar logos[4].

The results of the last state and federal elections also speak volumes: the political situation deeply unsettles her, makes her angry and often leaves her feeling helpless. The fact that

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[1] **May 8:** As the "Day of Liberation," May 8 marks the end of Nazi rule and the liberation from a criminal dictatorship. Reframed as a "Day of Remembrance," the emphasis shifts to a non-specific form of commemoration that can facilitate far-right victim-perpetrator reversal, because it blurs the asymmetry between the victims of Nazi persecution and the German society of perpetrators.

[2] **Dynamo Dresden:** The football club looks back on a long tradition and was particularly successful in the GDR. However, parts of its fan scene and the surrounding hooligan milieu repeatedly attract attention for violence as well as antisemitic and racist remarks, and some can be assigned to the far-right spectrum.

[3] **"Remigration":** In migration research, the term denotes the return of migrants to their countries of origin. In far-right circles, by contrast, it stands for ethno-cultural homogenization and the forced expulsion of people with a migration background.

[4] **Clothing brands:** Clothing serves as a group identifier. Brands such as Thor Steinar, Yakuza, or Eric & Sons draw on runes, black-white-red color schemes, and Viking motifs that allude to a purported Germanic-Aryan identity.

there is a strong sense of community and tolerance at her school reassures her time and again.

When she arrives at school, she notices the poster advertising the event on May 8. At the initiative of students, a memorial event for the victims will be held on the Day of Liberation, which marks the end of World War II. Finn, the committed student council president, has taken the initiative to prepare a speech for the occasion. Ms. Böhm considers such a stand against fascism particularly worthy of support.

On her way to the classroom, she lets her gaze sweep over the students: around 300 students between the ages of eleven and seventeen attend the school, which is particularly active in sports. For the past few months, a group of students has been campaigning against drugs and alcohol and advocating for a smoke-free schoolyard. Finn, the student council president, is particularly active and consistently stands out. He is well-liked by both his peers and the teaching staff: committed, concerned with the common good, hard-working, always exceptionally well prepared, and involved in various school clubs. When Ms. Böhm enters her ninth-grade classroom, her impression is confirmed: the students are a high-achieving group who help and support one another and participate actively in class.

After class, two of her female students approach her and ask for a confidential talk. Since Ms. Böhm, their homeroom teacher, always encourages her students to come to her with any problems they may have, she closes the door and takes the time to listen to them. One of the students takes her phone out of her bag and, after some hesitation, begins to explain. "We've been thinking for a long time about how to tell you this, and whether it might somehow just be snitching. But we're starting to get the impression that the teachers here don't really understand what's going on."

Ms. Böhm is surprised. Whatever is about to come up, she probably really hasn't seen it, because she can't think of any incident they could be referring to.

The students eventually show her Finn's social media account, where he can be seen with his martial arts group, playing soccer and hanging out with his friends. What immediately stands out is the clothing and style of his friends: Finn spends his free time with far-right youth groups. Ms. Böhm recognizes the Thor Steinar designs and finds them here alongside Yakuza T-shirts. The students show her photos, captions, Finn's friends, and the accounts he follows. They are certain of their assessment: "Ms. Böhm, Finn is a full on neo-Nazi. He

hangs out with some really hardcore people. And at school, he's somehow part of *the other* group, too. He always looks so well-behaved here at school, but he's actually someone completely different."

Ms. Böhm scrolls through the feed and, sure enough, she recognizes some of the people pictured from the school hallways.

One of the students adds: "I mean, we're planning this May 8 memorial event with the people from civics class right now, and it's really about putting into perspective how horrific World War II and fascism were and everything. I saw a TikTok recently from an influencer who always comments on and explains far-right stuff. It was about the Day of Liberation and how neo-Nazis are trying to claim it for themselves now, saying things like, 'Well, there were plenty of German victims too,' and so on, as if you could just weigh one against the other."
"Just imagine how awful this must be for our Jewish classmates, too, if Finn and those people end up hijacking our event." "Yeah, and maybe you just don't see what's going on in the bathrooms and in the chats, but we've already found a lot of stickers from identitarian groups[5]. And classic stuff like 18, 88, or DDD[6] is written everywhere, too."

After promising the students that she will look into it and, of course, keep their conversation confidential, Ms. Böhm leaves her classroom. Shocked by the new information and shaken by her own blindness, she pushes her way through the crowded school hallways toward the teachers' lounge. She needs to talk to her colleagues. On the way she passes the familiar groups, but now she looks at the dynamics differently. There are the soccer players, the students from the crochet club, and the teenagers who recently started a weekly discussion group for queer students: lots of laughing teenagers huddled together and spending their breaks in groups. She looks more closely and knows: students with immigrant and refugee backgrounds study here; German as a foreign and second language is offered as a regular subject; Jewish students study here, too. And with this realization comes concern, unease, and dismay.

"You won't believe what I've just heard!" she calls out as soon as she walks in, dropping exhaustedly into her usual seat.

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[5] **Identitarian groups** are far-right or New Right groupings that assert a purportedly homogeneous "cultural identity" and reject migration and societal diversity.

[6] **Number and letter codes** allude to far-right content in encrypted form: 18 stands for Adolf Hitler's initials (A = 1, H = 8), 88 for "H*eil *Hitler," and DDD for "Deutschland den Deutschen" ("Germany for the Germans"). They serve to circumvent bans on neo-Nazi statements.

"Come on, have a coffee first, and then the world will look completely different," says Ms. Gutmann soothingly. The 64-year-old colleague and chemistry teacher has a calm demeanor that immediately puts those around her at ease. "Now tell us what's got you so worked up?"

After a sip of coffee and a deep sigh, Ms. Böhm begins: "Okay, so Finn—our wonderful Finn, model student, popular with everyone, student council president, star of the judo team, basically everybody's darling—showed a whole new face today. Just now, two students showed me that Finn hangs around with far-right wing people in his free time. And it doesn't look as if he's having critical discussions with them. No, he's fully dressed like them, standing shoulder to shoulder with them on the sports team, grinning jovially among all those people wearing runic symbols. Right in the middle of them. I'm really shocked. And I don't know what to do. SOMEONE LIKE THAT can't possibly give the speech at the memorial. That would be a complete mockery and a humiliation to the Jewish victims and survivors."

"Hey, hey, hey, let's not throw the baby out with the bathwater." Thomas Brandner, easily recognizable as a PE teacher by his tracksuit and wiry build, pulls up a chair and grabs the nearest coffee cup. Then he makes a sweeping gesture toward the opposite wall. Certificates from statewide school competitions in judo and soccer hang there, neatly organized by year. The record is impressive: more than ten years of appearances in final rounds, very strong placements, and even a few victories. "You can't make such sweeping judgments. Finn has done so much good. And besides, who knows how serious this whole thing really is? I know him as an absolutely reliable guy, always there for the team, a star athlete, and genuinely popular with everyone. That wouldn't be the case if he were really seriously involved with the far right. So maybe he was curious about it at some point, okay, but we all went through our youthful missteps. Besides…"

"Excuse me?!" Ms. Gutmann's previously calm voice abruptly cuts off the PE teacher's attempts at explanation. Irritated, she pushes her coffee cup away so forcefully that a good splash of the brown liquid spills onto the table and slowly spreads across it. "You should just attend one meeting of our city and cultural association. Not a single week goes by without right-wing activity on the agenda: swastikas in underpasses, slogans outside the immigration office. But what really gets on my nerves are these subtle attempts to infiltrate everything. There we are, standing side by side at the memorial sites on May 8. I'm thinking about the countless senseless victims of the war and the perverse, systematic killing of Jewish people, while the person standing next to me is thinking, 'Oh, those poor, brave German soldiers

who died here. Enough with the guilt—we should be allowed to be proud of our country again!' And I'm telling you, this is becoming more and more common! And one day it's going to blow up in our faces. No, Thomas, honestly, right here and now we have to send a crystal-clear signal. No speech by Finn! Actually, I don't want a memorial event at all until everything is on the table and we have talked about it openly. Just imagine how this must feel for our Jewish students!"

Shaken by the intense reaction of her usually so calm and experienced colleague, Ms. Böhm first takes care of the spilled coffee. As she wipes it up with a cloth, she thinks aloud: "These certainly weren't just a few thoughtless moments on Finn's part. But I don't know—should we really cancel everything? There must also be students who genuinely want to commemorate the Jewish victims and the victims of the war, without some bizarre glorification of heroism in the back of their minds. We don't want to destroy that commitment. And think about how the parents will react."

"Exactly," Thomas Brandner quickly agrees. "That would be collective punishment. You'd also be calling a lot of good things at this school into question. And think about what it would mean for Finn!"

Now Ms. Böhm begins to have doubts, too. "Yes, you do have to give Finn credit for his good sides. At the parents' evening, several parents emphasized, without being asked, how well the class has developed. They mentioned their team spirit and the way they stand up for one another, no matter what. They also pointed out that, unlike other guys their age, the boys don't get drunk at every opportunity. Quite honestly—Finn has definitely played a part in that. And I've already read parts of Finn's speech. At first glance, there's nothing wrong with it."

"So let's hear him out first!" Thomas Brandner adds. "And let's be honest: democracy also means that people sometimes have different opinions—I'm just saying. You have to let people speak, don't you? You can't simply dictate who gets to say what around here."

Ms. Gutmann no longer looks angry now, but simply tired. Her 64 years and decades of teaching are written all over her face, as she leans forward and says very calmly: "I'm sorry, but you're being a little naïve. The 'good' you see has long been infused with right-wing thinking. The discipline in sports, the camaraderie, avoiding heavy drinking—that's all part of it. Look at Finn's brother! He isn't just the star of a martial arts club. He's actually running a

combat-ready gang with a clear ideological commitment. There's no doubt about it. It may start off harmless—even with positive side effects, like the ones parents notice among the students in the class. But that also means that, for the sake of this good, you overlook the covert shift and the way the far right is hijacking it. You somehow accept it and come to see it as 'normal.' And honestly, Elisa, whatever you read in that speech, it doesn't matter WHAT exactly is being said. If we let Finn speak, his very presence will make the content read in a particular way—one that at least the students will immediately understand." With that, she picks up her coffee cup and stands up. "I have to go. See you later? Prep for parent-teacher conferences?"

"Sure!" "Yes," Mr. Brandner and Ms. Böhm reply. They, too, gather up their things. Elisa Böhm calls it a day at school and reaches for her jacket. Lost in thought, she leaves the teachers' lounge. What should be done with Finn's speech now?

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