

GERMANY

Simon Strauss interviewed **Christian Meier**.

Interview date: October 2019.

Strauß: Dear Christian Meier, how would you describe your childhood? How would you characterise the way you grew up?

Meier: That's a difficult question. I've never really thought about it. All in all, it was a happy childhood. I was raised in a loving home, with understanding, especially from my mother, but also from my father. I was born in Stolp in Pomerania, Farther Pomerania, to be exact. People called Stolp "Little Paris" back then. It was on the way between Berlin, Stettin, Stolp, Danzig, and Königsberg. Major landowners from East Prussia and Pomerania traveled along this route and Stolp was a train stop. Stolp was the only bigger city in Farther Pomerania and a preferred destination for landowners with its own garrison, a cavalry regiment, an old regiment from Danzig, which had been relocated to Stolp in the Weimar Republic. I was wearing armor myself as part of a uniform, of the garrison. That's about the rough backdrop to Stolp. I left Stolp when I was four. My father was a public employee with the agricultural service and was transferred to Stettin in 1935, to Poznan in 1939, and later to Rostock.

Strauß: Do you remember your grandparents?

Meier: My grandfather on my mother's side had passed away already. My grandmother on my mother's side I remember fondly. I loved her very much. She had 16 grandchildren and it was always said I was her favourite. She came to our house often, even if just for a short visit. She lived on an estate in Saxony owned by one of her sons. This grandmother played a big role in my life. She came from a family of military officers, part nobility, of whom we know next to nothing, except that a couple of lieutenants served under Frederick the Great. She talked a lot about these people. There was another ancestor, who was a liberal representative in the Prussian National Assembly, of whom I *never* heard anything until I discovered him myself later. He belonged to the circle around Freiherr von Stein and the Prussian reformists. This made me part of a national tradition. My grandmother's grandfather participated in the Wars of Liberation, was discharged as a general, and had earned the "Iron Heart," which hung on her wall. My grandfather on my father's side lived in Braunschweig, was a classical scholar and worked as a director at a museum after that. He was a warm man but more of a background presence – so, an authoritative figure but very kind-hearted at the same time.

Strauß: Is there an item or memento from your childhood that you've saved and still have?

Meier: Nothing from my childhood. I've held on to a few things from the time I was 15 or 16 years old. Although, there are photographs.

Strauß: What were the conversations about the war like, with your parents, when it broke out?

Meier: My mother was incredibly scared of the war. We lived in a house in Stettin that was owned by younger people and we didn't have a radio back then. When Mussolini and Hitler met in Munich and the result was no war, my mother was relieved at first about the fact that there was going to be no war, and my father had no love for war, either. My mother joined the Red Cross in Stettin in 1939. She accompanied soldiers to Poland and helped with military hospital trains coming from the opposite direction. We moved to Rostock in 1941 where my mother had to transfer to the Red Cross in Rostock.

Strauß: Did you feel safe as a kid or were you fearful sometimes – did you experience moments of danger or threat?

Meier: It did not all turn into trauma in me.

Strauß: Not even when the war broke out?

Meier: No. But my grandmother taught me how to buy maps and use pins to indicate where troops were located. I could reconstruct entire front sections with yarn. This was simply part of what I was interested in because I grew up being interested in what my grandmother was interested in. Rostock's first big air raid soon followed, Lübeck first, then Rostock for four nights.

Strauß: But how did you experience these attacks?

Meier: I'm still terrified of air raids like that. It affected me greatly and in school we always had to practice to, in a word, protect the school, which never became necessary because the school was never bombarded. A friend of mine died in one of the raids.

Strauß: A child, you mean?

Meier: No, no. An older man. I belonged to a rowing club and he was part of the so-called "old gentlemen." He forgot to shut the door to his bunker, which led to his death. Then you, of course, experienced how explosives descended on the city, followed by firebombs. Or you had to redo entire roofs, for instance.

Strauß: And dead bodies in the streets?

Meier: I did not see any myself. But you collected shrapnel, for example.

Strauß: How did you view foreign countries at this time, or rather, did that play a role in your thinking?

Meier: No, I don't think so. I have to say that I saw the enlargement of Germany with a level of excitement. Not the Nazis but the expanding fatherland made me happy.

Strauß: And Europe as concept? Did that play a role?

Meier: No, I can't say that it did.

Strauß: When did you travel abroad for the first time?

Meier: I visited my father in Poznan in the winter. That's abroad nowadays but back then it was already "incorporated." That was in early 1940-41. There were long lines in front of grocery stores but as a German you didn't have to wait in line and got your turn quicker. I myself thought this was wonderful, at ten, eleven years old, to which my dad responded that this is not something I should do. So, in this regard, I was very lucky with my father – if you think about it in retrospect. My uncle owned an estate on the Polish side, fairly close to the German-Silesian border. We went to the nearest train station, were picked up by a horse-drawn sled, and rode through several villages to his estate – I remember this *very* well.

Strauß: Let's skip to your time in school. Is there a certain event or occasion you remember from school, or a day, a special time of embarrassment, shame, or success?

Meier: I had an art teacher in Stettin, who stood in front of the class at the beginning of each period to deliver some kind of announcement. A great proclamation accompanied by shouts of "Sieg Heil!" and "Heil Hitler!" It was mandatory, everybody had to greet Hitler.

Strauß: So, you as a child had to as well?

Meier: As a child, yes. In the Hitler Youth, of course. But otherwise...one thing that made a big impression on me. We had a store for colonial goods in Stettin and I had to get something there. I was a pretty shy child and said, "Good day," because that's what I was used to. A young man, who was also at the store, screamed at me with the words, "It's 'Heil Hitler!' from now on!" The strange thing is that, later at Hitler Youth, one of those leaders was my friend. When you went to this boy's house, his mother greeted you with "Heil Hitler!" That was just not a thing that existed in my surroundings, which is why I noticed it. On the other hand, I remember scenes - as a member of the Hitler Youth you were obliged to greet officers - where I saw a young officer, who had a knight's cross around his neck, and it impressed me so much that I looped around once more just to greet him again.

Strauß: Did you have a favourite book as a kid?

Meier: I have two strong memories, from when I was about 14, of Felix Dahn, *Kampf um Rom* ["Battle for Rome," TN] and *König und Papst* ["King and Pope," TN] by Heinrich Roth Kaiser. It was about the history of Conradin, how he sets out to

reconstitute his rule in southern Italy, which fails, ending with his execution in Naples. A really German story. The Italians are all cheats, of course, and Conradin and the Germans all very noble.

Strauß: What did you study and why?

Meier: From Rostock, we fled to Hamburg, just before the Russians entered Rostock. I lived with foster parents in Hamburg, a very loving second parental home. We couldn't afford university, so I thought I had to work hard, get good grades, which I managed. After three years of studying, I wanted to go back to my mother's. She had gone back to Rostock in the meantime and I wanted to take a break in the summer, without any clarity about what I wanted to study yet. I had two things in mind. First, Physics and Chemistry, which I applied for at Göttingen where they had a Numerus Clausus (limited number of entries). The second option was History, Slavic Studies, specifically. The reason was that I wanted to study totalitarian movements, of which there was a left-wing and a right-wing one with the Soviets and the National Socialists. That was my point of departure. But with monetary reform in 1948, my scholarship was rendered moot. But I stayed busy in Rostock, attended lectures, which were not quite course work. The lecture on Ancient History took place at noon and the train to Warnemünde departed at a time that forced me to leave before 1 pm. I studied a little bit of Psychology afterwards because that interested me as well. I began my path into Ancient History in the winter. All mere coincidences, which applies to my life in general.

Strauß: But your parents had wanted you to attend university?

Meier: Inspired by my grandmother, I originally wanted to join the military. But, strangely enough, in the Third Reich, I only applied as a reserve officer. In 1944, rumour had it the "Führer" wanted the entire class of '29 to move over to the Waffen-SS. The Waffen-SS consisted of volunteers but we, myself and other applicants, had already signed up for the Wehrmacht, to become reserve officers. We went to the Wehrmacht officer-in-training, and he said that if we signed up to the Wehrmacht, we would join the Wehrmacht, not the Waffen-SS. In January 1945, we got our physical, I was 15 years old then, and then the officer candidates were put on hold because it was said that you couldn't end up with 16-year-old lieutenants. This is how I avoided going to war. The others had to do fatigue duty and military service. After the war, you couldn't become an officer any longer, if one still sought out such a career, and you were left with university. I had no idea what else to do.

Strauß: Did you have a professor or teacher that made an impression on you or played a special role in your life?

Meier: Not in Rostock. But, after I was supposed to get arrested, I transferred to Heidelberg. And in Heidelberg was Hans Schaefer, who influenced me greatly.

Strauß: Why were you supposed to get arrested?

Meier: I can't exactly tell you. After all, they didn't get me, which would have been when they might have told me. I'm guessing it was because, as was the case at many universities in 1950 in the GDR, the opposition was being "decapitated." I think it was a part of taking out the opposition.

Strauß: What kind of opposition was that?

Meier: Basically, something pretty harmless. But we opposed the SED (Socialist Unity Party), the FDJ (Free German Youth), and the Sovietization of university. Every class was supposed to have a FDJ circle, in which teachers were meant to be indoctrinated for socialism, so to speak. We fought back against this. Berlin had an office that was in charge of the five universities in East Germany, six with the Technische Universität in Dresden. They had people report back to them about what was going on at these universities. I knew people in that office and went and talked to them. They collected information, as I was planning a trip to Berlin, also in order to deliver information. Some of the information had to be given to me by a fellow student. So, we met in an empty lecture hall where, coincidentally, a SED party secretary showed up. At night, they would drive by my house where the backside of our track home led to Rostock's old rampart. Had the police wanted to surround the house, they would have had to walk for 15 minutes in order to reach the backside of the house, which they didn't do. It also got a little cold around midnight, so I got up to close the balcony door. A car would drive up, which happened very rarely around there, and I would reflexively turn off the light. I immediately received the drivers' "audible business card," who said, "Shit, now he turned off the light." They couldn't enter below, one tried the balcony, which was shut, too, and I could escape through the back. I took detours to West Berlin. A week later, they arrested someone else and apparently treated that person badly. They tried to get seven or eight but only got three or four. One was warned. The police entered a vicarage, rounded up the family in the hallway, and didn't let anyone go to their room except the seven-year-old sister, who promptly tied a string to a wooden block with a message for the young community below to tell them to send words to my brother. So, my brother was warned, and he warned the next guy, who packed a suitcase, which got him caught. I saw all these people later in Berlin again because you had to be recognised as a political refugee and that's how I learned the whole story.

Strauß: Was that when you informed your parents?

Meier: My parents had separated. My father was in Braunschweig, my mother practically went through it with me. She stayed there for the time being but had to submit her fingerprints to the criminal register. She was protected by her dean, an old Social Democrat, though no SED man, but still powerful enough.

Strauß: She was at the university as well?

Meier: She was a secretary.

Strauß: Do you remember whether you doubted things that you learned during your studies at university? Ideologically or politically?

Meier: I doubted everything, pretty much. I had the feeling that I had to find everything out for myself, which was quite a hindrance. Mr. Schaefer, the professor of Ancient History at the university, was a skeptic himself. A great skepticism that was harmful in its extent.

Strauß: What were your dreams, what did you want to do with your life?

Meier: I wanted to graduate. What to do after that was unclear to me. An academic career was just one option. I thought about becoming a journalist or about going into politics. Things that didn't have anything to do with antiquity.

Strauß: Politics in what way?

Meier: Back then it was called the "Bundeszentrale für Heimatschutz" [*"federal office for homeland security," TN*], today it's called "Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung" [*"federal office for political education," TN*], and I knew them from Heidelberg, conferences in Munich etc. You came into contact with delegates, for instance, and that's how I built connections. My intentions were firmly rooted in the present. I did not imagine becoming an elected official myself and wanted to join the federal office. I would have, too, had my doctoral adviser not made me an offer at the last minute.

Strauß: Which languages did you speak, understand or read back then, when you attended university?

Meier: I, of course, read English and French and then I learned Italian for academic reasons, in order to read books. I left the GDR in 1950 and in 1951, the archaeological institute in Heidelberg made its first field trip to Paestum, which I joined. You traveled there by yourself and I first visited Verona, Florence, Rome, and Naples. I saw a lot and you could say that this was my first contact with Europe. Florence's Baptistery in particular, where Italians stood and sat around nearby, and I could speak to them in Italian. About the future of Europe, for example. I only went to France when I was invited to a presentation and I gave lectures in French there myself.

Strauß: Was being German a burden in regards to first meeting Italians or French? You hear stories about being spat on and such things.

Meier: No, not at all. That never happened to me. Maybe once in Naples but that wasn't because I was German, more general behavior in bad quarters of the city. But I never had the feeling that it was directed at me being German. I was received very well everywhere when I went abroad.

Strauß: What was your most important source of knowledge at university?

Meier: I read the FAZ. They had a student subscription for five Marks a month and you had to pick them up in the bookstore. I made notes in the margins and not only stayed informed that way but learned a lot in general. I read all of Thomas Mann, I read Robert Musil, Hofmannsthal, and a lot on top of those.

Strauß: How did you experience the educational system as a whole back then? Did it still function as an authoritarian institution, maybe even in uncomfortable ways?

Meier: I did not experience any of my teachers as authoritarian. You were beaten, of course, in primary school, especially, but not outside of that. I was a very good but very naughty student and never improved my C in conduct, which gave me great satisfaction. But it was essentially the worst grade they gave out. I also got the *consilium abeundi*, which they sent to the house on Christmas, and it enraged my father enough to simply ignore it.

Strauß: What was the *consilium abeundi*?

Meier: The advice to leave the school. You could get expelled but ahead of being expelled, you got a warning, which was the *consilium abeundi*. I got it for my naughty behavior, even though my teachers were generally on my side.

Regarding the question about the educational system: My history teacher, for example, meant a lot to me. He was an old freemason and principal at the school in Bad Doberan. He had been released from his post by the Nazis but was allowed to continue as a teacher. The principal, whom I was also fond of, taught the same subjects. He could remain principal but couldn't teach history because the Nazis considered him untenable. These two teachers were very important to me during my time in Rostock. The history teacher removed a bunch of stuff from the Nazi history books that he didn't like. He changed assignment questions, for example. This teacher committed suicide in the end. Authoritarian rule in primary school, yes, that could be a "tough regiment." Otherwise, not really.

Strauß: To touch on the sphere of Jewish life, did that play a role in your life, in your youth, for example?

Meier: In Stettin, I played with kids in the streets, like you did back then, and one day, I was taken aside and told that I couldn't play with three of those kids because they were Jews. I went to my father and asked him what Jews are, I had no idea. He asked me if I had the feeling that those kids were somehow different from me. When I answered him "No", he told me to go back and play with them. The kids themselves were Christian but their father was Jewish, the mother a Christian. The father had been an officer in World War I and a member of the Black Reichswehr, a dedicated soldier in general. Back then, we played with toy soldiers. We put down sheets and played, the four of us, those kids and I.

There was another encounter with Jews where I didn't even know that they were Jewish. An older couple with a big dog, who kept bothering me. He didn't bite but he bothered me. The couple told me to come with them and, as a kind of apology, I got a chocolate bar. I was very proud and went to my father, who knew that this couple was Jewish, and he asked me where I got the chocolate. When I told him what had happened, he just said, "See, those are nice people." Those three kids all went to England in 1938, which I found out at recess in school. After recess, we sang Christmas songs, one of which was "Lasst uns froh und munter sein." I still can't stand that song, to this day because the memory of having those three friends taken from me runs incredibly deep. Luckily, the parents followed in 1939. They brought a good-bye present the last time they visited, and everybody was laughing out loud. Though, at nine- or ten-years old standing with them, I did not understand what was supposed to be so funny. Their present was Hitler's *Mein Kampf*, completed with an exlibris: "Bauchwitz" That was the family's last name. Unfortunately, that gift was lost. I kept in touch with them long after they had left. The mother's father, the "Aryan" father, in other words, was an important children's book publisher, the Franz Schneider publishing house. He got married several times, also to a Jewish woman, whom he refused to pay alimony to because he made his money printing books for "Aryan" children and thought he couldn't possibly support a Jewess with that money. A court ordered him to pay up, though. After the war, my father resumed correspondence and got back in touch with the family directly. The youngest son, the one I was closest to of the three, came to the physics institute in Heidelberg, just when I was in the middle of my dissertation, certified physicist and all, to attend a lecture. My professor, Mr. Schaefer, was very engaged in taking care of old émigrés, and so, Victor Ehrenberg came to Heidelberg. Hans Georg Pflaum, too, with whom I kept in close contact as well. We became friends.

Strauß: But you had no knowledge of the extermination situations?

Meier: No. Well, I knew that Jews were stuck into concentration camps, which is what happened to the father on November 9, 1938, and which is why he decided they had to leave Germany. I got a bayonet, by the way, when my father was given *Mein Kampf*, a kind of dagger, with a pointy device that you attached onto the firearm, making a bayonet. The casing and the handle were still there, the rest was gone, though, because Jews weren't allowed to own weapons. I had forgotten about that and my mother reminded me years later that I got a gift, too, back then.

Strauß: Let's return to your career. Can you remember what you bought from the first money you earned yourself?

Meier: Nothing of much significance. I got married in 1954, two years before earning my doctoral degree. I was excluded from the scholarship foundation because I was married. But as a recognised political refugee I received more from the Federal Equalisation of Burdens Office than I had received from the foundation. Our son was born soon after that, so no bigger purchases.

Strauß: How, would you say, did your work, or more specifically, the family influence your life?

Meier: That was certainly the case. I did work a lot, after all. It was a given that father was sitting at the desk, although, in my view, I also took care of the kids. We often went to the theatre and made a point of going on vacation, always Italy or Greece. Denmark once, which was followed by the decision to never go again where the Romans had not been before. After that, I had a wonderful assignment with a program in Norway that started in 1985. I was in charge of that for years as part of a brilliant collaboration. On the occasion of my last conference in 2000, I took a small old cruise ship, 30 or 40 people, up to the North Cape.

Strauß: Can you remember when computers took over the work place and what that meant for you?

Meier: I made sure my secretary got one. Then there were a few complications with transferring the files for my book to the publishing house.

Strauß: But why did you refuse to make the computer your own?

Meier: I had no reason to. I had a secretary – what would I need a computer for?

Strauß: But you had a typewriter?

Meier: Yes, I of course used a typewriter to write, never very well, and without much enthusiasm. Only when it was absolutely necessary. My mother typed up my dissertation and my habilitation study for me on the typewriter.

Strauß: Your mother?

Meier: Yes. I wrote it by hand and my mother transcribed it. The dissertation even twice because there wasn't enough carbon copies in the end. So, I didn't really have a reason to get a computer. I needed a computer as little as I needed a typewriter. I always wrote by hand and only sometimes used a Dictaphone or the fax machine, those are my most recent technological conquests.

Strauß: Did you work abroad for an extended period of time? In France?

Meier: Only four weeks in France.

Strauß: You never worked abroad? I'd say longer stays abroad influence one's work a lot.

Meier: Influence? I had fairly good relationships in Paris and frequently worked with Jean-Pierre Vernant and others like Vidal Naquet. I learned a lot from them. There was also the famous Paul Veyne, who invited me to come to the College de France for a month for four lectures. I had a doctoral candidate who was married to a French woman

and lived in Paris. He established the connections to the French. I had received an invitation from a professor there some time before that, around 1973. I also spent a quarter of a year in Princeton, at the Institute for Advanced Study. I only held an adjunct professorship in Odense for 14 days, shortly before unification, which dealt with historiography. Other than that, I only taught my own students. I can't say I had a particular desire to do something else. I

Strauß: Would you take the same career path, if you were 20 again today?

Meier: I don't know but I don't think so. To be a professor today is such a pain, even though it wasn't exactly my goal back in the day, either. But that was the way you did research in those days, which I liked. There was a time I thought about the Max-Planck-Institut history, which would have been interesting for me, but it didn't work out. I enjoyed taking a year off at the expense of Volkswagen. That is how I was able to do research in Berlin for a year. So, I did enjoy my working life. But I would not want to be a professor today. I just read the letters Reinhard Koselleck and Carl Schmitt wrote to each other, in which the former talks about how we really only are tenured schoolteachers and senior schoolteachers. Other than that, we essentially can't do anything and no longer work properly. When I look at my daughter's situation as a professor of Romanistic in Göttingen today, my old job doesn't seem very appealing anymore. Back in the day, it was work that gave you a lot of independence. You had your assistants, your secretary, all secured without a budget and recruited somehow, and it provided the means to do research and historiographical work.

Strauß: Let's return to your political coming of age. What were some of the most significant political events in your life?

Meier: Unification, for one, when I was at the peak of my publishing career, and experiences I had thanks to Joachim Fest, the former editor of the F.A.Z., when we met up and he asked me to write on one topic or another for the Sunday paper. I also joined the Historikerstreit on my own volition and was head of the association for "Sprache und Dichtung" from 1985 or 1986 until 1988, which had always come with a certain degree of public exposure.

Strauß: Do you remember where you were when the wall opened up and how you experienced that moment?

Meier: I was on the phone and on my way to Berlin where I had an appointment. When I wanted to confirm the meeting in the morning, I learned that the wall had opened up. So, I went to the airport in Riem. I went to the "Ciao"-bar on the Kurfürstendamm and ran into the actress Tina Engel, who asked me what would be done now about salaries, and I remember very well how I told her, "Now we have to take over the run-down place!" Right after, I went to the structural commission for West Berlin. I was chair of the commission, which the academies had newly founded. I was so busy there back then that I only returned to Munich for lectures and seminars. So, to university and then straight back to Riem and to Berlin. I was not in charge of hiring people but I was part

of many structural decisions, which could get very complicated because higher education commission meant: What do we do about three Berlin universities? Do we need three? Especially the philosophy departments of the technological universities. Sinology was supposed to be available everywhere, which led to a huge fight. Representatives of ancient studies distinguished themselves by wanting to establish sixteen professorships for Ancient History and Antiquity at Humboldt university on top of that. I was never involved directly, even though I was in the loop because all it took was one call to the senator, whom I was close to, because the academy project ran much better that way than the one over at the Academy of the Arts. He is grateful to this day. Some of the demands were really outrageous because no one was there to supervise for the time being, and even though I was commissioned to re-establish the academy, I was not in charge of Greek and Roman numismatics, for example, which was why they installed advisors from West Germany everywhere, and, overall, that worked well.

Strauß: Looking back to the founding of the European Union, do you remember the early hours of the formation of a European idea?

Meier: I, of course, closely followed the foundation of the European Coal and Steel Community and supported it. I did not go to the border to tip over a brick, like Helmut Kohl did, or anything like that. I had no reason to travel there. But the idea of working together, of getting along, and of traveling freely, in short, of building closer ties, fundamentally appealed to me from the start.

Strauß: With German guilt in mind, that the European Union could help Germany, in a way, deal with its guilt as well?

Meier: Not in a direct sense like that. That German guilt is a peculiar thing in my case. As I mentioned before, my father was no Hitler sympathizer, and even though Hitler Youth could be fun, like learning how to shoot, for example, which I loved, as well as sports, I was no regime supporter, which is why I chose the lowest rank one could get. That was the rank of “Jung.” The higher ranks all came with cord embellishments that I didn’t like and never tried to earn. I picked the lowest rank because I didn’t want to become a full Hitler Youth member. Hitler Youth back then was the term for the entire apparatus, so, for everyone over the age of 14. A horrible bunch of teens. You could avoid it by having a lower rank with the “Jungvolk,” which was the term for everyone between 10 and 14, to receive the command over ten people as junior leader. The command was nothing to write home about but that is how I was spared Hitler Youth. I had nothing against Jews. My father always aired his opinions fairly freely at the dinner table but also warned me to never repeat such things outside because he could go to the concentration camp for it. Luckily, he was never sent to one.

Strauß: Do you know who your father voted for back then?

Meier: Unfortunately, I don’t.

Strauß: But not the Social Democrats?

Meier: No. I'd assume he was a German nationalist, a conservative, probably with nationalistic tendencies, too. I was baptized under a black-red-and-white flag. I don't know why but before the ceremony, a flag like that was put up in the hallway at home with a cross attached to the front. Even Hitler's mustache bothered him. "Look at that! Do you think that's the Nordic race? Look at that face, that head! That is no Nordic race." He always said that. I remember that we walked through Rostock after the air raids and looked at the destruction. The political leaders walked around in their brown uniforms, one of whom seemed to want to help because he carried this can with him in a strange manner. My father said, "Look at that. He can't even hold a can the right way." He criticized the whole thing wherever he could. When collections went around at the Hitler Youth for the winter aid organisation and you could sell a badge for 20 pennies to purchase Christmas ornaments, I bought a horseback rider figurine. But when I asked my father to hang it on the tree, he refused. He was apolitical about these things, generally, but whatever came from the Hitler Youth was rejected. You had to hang the swastika flag from your window on Hitler's birthday every year, and every year, my father cursed the fact that he had to do it. So, I was made relatively "immune" to the Nazis.

Strauß: And after the war there were no accusatory discussions with your father?

Meier: Whom should I have accused?

Strauß: I just wonder if the nationalistic-conservative element was a problem in your youth?

Meier: I was leaning that way but then ended up in this loving second parental home in Hamburg where I found my foster father, a great, if slightly romantic or peculiar man. He had attended Colonial School and gone to German South West Africa, while my father traveled to Australia. He stayed in Africa and kept talking about his "Neger," not in a malicious way but he often said things like, "We can't put pants on them. They have to wear their own garb." He dreamed of the medieval German empire that had included Italy and hoped that the ties between Berlin and Rome would last and be revived in the form of the Axis. Like I said, a bit of a romantic. He was a party member but I can't remember animosity towards Jews. His wife was half-Jewish. She visited us for a time because she couldn't heat her apartment.

The Nuremberg trials had always fascinated me. There was a collection of documents by Peter de Mendelssohn that I was dying to read. I went to the bookshop every day to see if they had arrived. I remember the death sentences on the radio very well.

Strauß: How did that make you feel in that moment? Was it a relief for you that was tied to your sense of justice?

Meier: I'm not sure but, like I said, it interested me very much.

Strauß: But the development of Europeanisation was not seen in that context back then?

Meier: The matter of the extermination camps was believed by few to be true at that time, and I was probably also pretty incredulous, even though I can't quite remember what I thought. But I do know that my German teacher read Grimmelshausen with us and asked one day why, did we think, we had spent so much time on it. The answer he wanted to hear was that Grimmelshausen describes the Thirty Years War in such grueling detail that it didn't seem believable. He wanted to convey to us, it seemed, that everything the Allies presented to us was not to be believed. Rumours were everywhere and inner resistance. People didn't look into things very closely because everyone was focused on building a new life and you took comfort in the small things, that trains ran again and bridges were rebuilt. I think anything other than either not believing or at least going into denial in the beginning would have been impossible.

Strauß: When did you become aware?

Meier: The absolute certain terminus ante quem is 1965, even though I began to rethink in the 1950s already and noticed what had happened. I had just had my daughter baptised by the university pastor in 1965 and he showed up one day and said he wanted to take the parish on an excursion to the Schauinsland mountains. He needed a guide until 8th May 1965. The historians of contemporary history had all turned him down and because we knew each other through the baptism he asked me. I took him up on his request and what I wrote about it then, a kind of conclusion for 8th May 1945 with positives, like wars ending, and negatives, like the loss of territory in the east, still represents my opinion today, namely that, inasmuch as one had caused such devastation, the name could no longer be carried with pride and believing in the point of it all as damaged as well. This conclusion goes, of course, without saying, and I started to think that way early on.

Strauß: But you didn't visit concentration camps or see any of the famous films the Allies made?

Meier: As far as I can remember, I didn't see any of that. There was a French movie, "Bei Nacht und Nebel," that I saw. But not the Allies' films, nor the first documentaries.

Strauß: When you look back now, can you say that there were politicians you admired or appreciated?

Meier: Beginning in the mid-1950s, yes, though not uncritically, but without a doubt, I admired Mr. Adenauer. I appreciated him a lot in the years 1953/54, as well as the FDP politicians Dehler and Erhardt as a good minister in charge of the economy. My students and I didn't agree with everything Adenauer said and there was much debate about whether to accept Stalin's offers to negotiate. We understood that it was a way to regain international standing, to rearm, and to play a role again internationally. Those were the things I admired about Mr. Adenauer. I got pretty close to him one time when

we sat upstairs on the tram in Hamburg. He was campaigning in Hamburg and when I sat on the top level in the tram, he drove right by us in his car, an expensive Mercedes 300. I also listened to Kurt Schumacher once.

Strauß: When did you vote for the first time and for whom?

Meier: I was still in the GDR in 1949 but in 1953 I voted for the CDU, which was to be more of an exception rather than the rule. I've usually voted FDP. One time, in Baden-Württemberg, I also voted SPD.

Strauß: ... with a certain distance to paternal influence?

Meier: My mother was not much interested in politics and my father died in 1954. But I'd assume that he voted CDU. I made a derisive comment about the Americans and the Korean War once, and my father reminded me of the American tank, that I wasn't allowed to deride them because they ensured our security. So, he stood firmly on the West's side.

Strauß: Your liberal views came with experiences at university, I assume?

Meier: Yes, that made sense to me back then.

Strauß: Did you ever have any political opinions that made you feel lonely?

Meier: If you mean whether I ever held political beliefs that singled me out from everyone else, then no. Many people were shocked when the FDP joined Willy Brandt's faction but that never made me nervous.

Strauß: So, you always had the feeling that your political views found representation?

Meier: Not necessarily, but I can't say that I felt somehow abandoned with my politics. Of course, there were always things I disagreed with or where I disagreed on how to do things but that is not unusual.

Strauß: Can you share distinct moments of Germany's history as a federal state, in which you disagreed with decisions or thought they should have been handled differently? In regards to Europeanisation: The relationship between Germany and Europe, the rise of a large European federation of states – how do you see these things?

Meier: European unification always made sense to me. If it will ever be possible to create a state out of that, I still can't say with certainty. When it came to that, I was more skeptical and cautious. The European bureaucracy, the "ban on crooked bananas" and such, always rubbed me the wrong way. But I'm not a big fan of bureaucracy anyways. Among the flood of letters that reached me on my birthday was one by Gerrit Walter, a historian from Wuppertal, who now sits on the historical commission of the Bavarian academy, and he mentioned an old lecture I gave, at the

end of which I was asked if there was a specific motto I would want to send students on their way with. Apparently, I said, "Obstruct the bureaucrats wherever you can!" This was confirmed by a colleague. I've always sabotaged bureaucracy when it was beneficial. I consider sabotage to be something very useful if it helps move things along.

Strauß: Would that have been a reason for you to protest?

Meier: I only joined a demonstration once, in Hamburg in 1947. On the subway, people were talking about a protest that was going to take place in front of city hall. I went out of curiosity.

Strauß: What were they protesting against?

Meier: Against the British and the occupying forces in general. I can't remember exactly what the occupying forces were doing but there I was in front of city hall. There were chants such as, "We aren't Indians!" No Englishmen kept us from doing it, so they were truly liberal. But it was a real demonstration, not a small march or something.

Strauß: When did you first have the feeling that you bear political responsibility? Was there a moment, outside of the Historikerstreit, or would you say that was the key moment?

Meier: To the dismay of many and to the delight of the press, my inaugural lecture in Basel in 1968 was titled "The historian's science and the contemporary's responsibility." Carl Schmitt was part of the backdrop to this inaugural. I was asked many times to repeat the lecture in different places afterwards, which I did. Often on different topics, of course. It was and is obvious to me that you bear a responsibility, just like publicists or journalists, that certain things must be said and explained. It's hard for me to say when this first dawned on me, but it must have been in the early 1950s when I started thinking about our young democracy.

Strauß: The idea of the citizen is of crucial importance to you as well?

Meier: Yes! Especially in the context of antiquity, but also in regards to current affairs, it is very meaningful to me.

Strauß: Were there moments when you genuinely felt like a European? You already talked about Florence but were there similar situations?

Meier: Though I am in the middle of writing a European history, it focuses on the formation of what represents Europe today. It's certainly relevant to what Europe is supposed to be and is already. The idea originally came from Wolf Jobst Siedler in the late 1980s, initially only as an editorial idea, already with the growing impression that everything would gradually grow closer together.

Strauß: Appealing a little to the emotional side of things, would you agree that there is something like a European foundation that can be identified, that Croats, Slovenes, and Luxembourgers have something in common?

Meier: I would say that, with all the enmity and wars, Europeans share a common history. More broadly through the shared Christian theology that shaped it. What happened in the 6th and 7th centuries B.C., the years that profoundly and lastingly informed Christianity in the long run, has led to a certain culture based on the idea of liberty. There was no powerful monarch and no powerful clergy outside of that in Delphi, whose influence was relatively limited because it only gave advice, whereby it indirectly fostered the cities' independence instead of issuing dogma. What Schiller said about human beings seeking out the certainties of Christian dogma and the church in times of need, to be told what should be done, did not occur then. Such cultures emerged in their beginnings and in different forms, and disappeared in equally multifarious ways, but with the victory over the Persians in the 5th century and everything that followed from there, a wholly new situation had established itself. I just finished a paper about unknown Athenians. It made me conclude that this resonant public space played a key role in processing and reconstructing everything that had happened through poets, sophists, and orators, which subsequently flowed into and was further developed by the philosophies of Plato and Aristotle. I don't believe that the thing commonly referred to as "bürgerliches Kulturgut" [*a bourgeois idea of culture, TN*] was that important for the educational advances that occurred through medieval and early modern Europe. The questions are, though. Jacob Burckhardt says that at no time in history was the ratio of people interested in philosophy as high as in antiquity. Probably because there was nothing else to sink your teeth into. After Aristotle, Plato, and the Stoics had answered all the questions, the leaders of the Christian church were compelled to deliver their own answers. Formulating answers always means formulating questions. So, I would say that the disquieting questions concerning people reached the Middle Ages through detours and delays. Whether those questions are relevant in Slovenia, Poland, or France, I couldn't say, but they could matter in Germany, England, or Spain. That is something that only exists in Europe.

Strauß: These specific questions?

Meier: A questioned existence that prompts you to think about it. You always read books by other people but, at the end of the day, independently thinking about these things is a true mark of Europe. In China, Confucius went to the great monarchs and said, "My lord, you should do this and that." In Athens, Solon said to the people, "This and that will happen, if you don't intervene." Nobody was speaking to the Chinese people. But they spoke to the emperor, just like in India. Most of the time, these doubtless smart people turned against mid-level authorities and towards their emperors because they were the real source of corruption. They had to be fought but it all remained an exclusive dialog between scholars and monarch. The population was relieved of its responsibility this way. In Europe it all worked and works completely

differently, of course, even though there is reason to worry whether it is sustainable amid the numerous populists.

Strauß: Participation, and above all, the idea of freedom, appear to be central elements to you.

Meier: Freedom and the related independence to make your own judgments. Sabotage at times, when required.

Strauß: So, do you feel that you've spent your life fighting for freedom?

Meier: In the GDR, if you want. By trying to undermine the entire dogma through leadership and student groups. In Rostock, it was put to a vote. The students of the philosophy faculty debated in the auditorium, many proponents of the opposite side among them. At the end of the oblong auditorium, there was a balcony, from which came an immense noise when you walked underneath it, because it was customary back then to knock and stomp your feet as a welcome. It was intense on the old wooden floor. The vote that I partook in had us prevail over the opponents and win with 200 to 11 votes. That definitely was a fight for freedom.

Strauß: And in your role as a professor, did you feel like you were defending freedom?

Meier: Yes. I defended critical students, for instance. Some people were convinced that it was necessary to protect freedom from the '68 movement. When I fled the East to Heidelberg, there was another guy who had fled, an astronomer, who had been hired by the faculty in Heidelberg. We were solemnly presented everywhere because everyone wanted to know what was going on in the GDR. Me, as a student, and this astronomer, as a professor, were invited to several events and our impression over these 15 years was that the entire republican society was an incredibly bourgeois "club" that we sometimes met with derision and mockery. When you ran into someone on the streets in East Germany, you'd say, "Thank goodness you're still here!" It was not a great situation, overall.

Strauß: Is there a work of art that has influenced you especially?

Meier: If I like a work of art, it will be by Musil. Not only his big works but also those less well-known, such as "Helpless Europe." I also love Hofmannsthal but Musil has left the greatest impression on me. Karl Kraus, too, in a way, which is why I quoted him in the inaugural lecture mentioned above.

Strauß: Is there a joke that has stuck with you?

Meier: There actually is one that I was told as a kid, still in the Nazi era. At the time of Hitler's rise to power in 1933, it was also Karneval season, and Hindenburg, who could no longer read, was said to have given a speech dictated to him by someone. It went as follows: "German men"- "German men"- "and women"- "and women"- "the German people"- "the German people"- "has lost"- "has lost"- "all morality"- "all morality"- "you can't

find”-“you can’t find”-“it any longer”-“it any longer”-“at work”-“at work”-“only at balls”-“only at balls”-“Woof, woof!” I told a lot of jokes and loved it, was told jokes by other people, and sometimes told a joke myself in challenging situations. Not this one, necessarily, but I like it especially.

Strauß: If you think back to your twenties, were you more of an optimistic person or did you have a pessimistic outlook on the future?

Meier: I would say, I was waiting and seeing. Not really pessimistic nor optimistic, just always seeing what would happen next. But I have to say that I was swept away in the early 1950s when everything was rebuilt. That bridges, train stations, schools were being rebuilt, that people went back to work and factories opened, that life found its way back onto its tracks, all that was a good situation for me and carried me along with it. The future remained open to me. I’m not someone drawn to utopia, nor to historical philosophy. But a certain feeling of “us” existed in me. Experiencing a functioning democracy, still absent in the East, contributed significantly to this feeling. It was mainly this feeling of community, which is also how the ‘68ers were integrated into society, eventually. In my view, this is the great achievement of the time around 1970, that society opened up and gave these students their due, which neutralized the students’ cause at the same time. The political shift of 1969 also showed that government could be done differently. At least this gave my own fate a slightly more sanguine disposition. My fellow doctoral candidates were always surprised that I was so calm and carefree, considering I was already married and had a child at the time.

Strauß: How did you imagine the year 2000?

Meier: Not at all.

Strauß: No thoughts of fundamental shifts on the horizon?

Meier: No, not really. Becoming an adult has also meant scaling down idealistic expectations to smaller goals, such as political participation, that seemed more attainable and realistic. I taught several prognosis seminars that mainly dealt with Pericles and Frederick the Great. But we also talked about Jacob Burckhardt, who always writes that you can’t predict the future in his texts on Greek cultural history, even though he made several – and often very good – predictions himself.

Strauß: You once told your students to write down predictions and put them into the drawer, didn’t you? What did your own say?

Meier: I only did it orally because I didn’t have time to put it in writing. I never followed my own advice, even though it was good advice because everyone could prognosticate freely about whatever seemed important to them. One student wrote about Turkey, how it sat in a key geographical position. He already saw that in the 1990s, when nobody was talking about Afghan refugees. That surprised me back then because it was an important realisation.

Strauß: Did the fall of the wall change your outlook on the future?

Meier: It is true – I in no way expected that to happen. There is a professor of Ancient History in Konstanz, Wolfgang Schuller, who wrote an article about how unification was on its way in January 1989. I was still of the opinion that the future remained open. I always considered politics to be open that way but that the wall would actually open up – and so suddenly – I would never have thought. Around the years 1989/90, I often sent the FAZ my predictions, many wrong, but what happened there was difficult to get a grasp on. On 22nd November, Reinhard Koselleck had won the award for historians, Richard von Weizsäcker was there, and my first FAZ article had just been published. Weizsäcker said to me that he'd been thinking about my article. It seems that I'm better at predicting the medium-term, as opposed to long-term developments.

Strauß: Did you have something like approaching “enemies” in life, or did you ever hear that someone else considered you their enemy?

Meier: I'd be reluctant to use the word “enemy.” That you come across opponents and that you find yourself marginalised is true. My first book was well received, and I got several calls. But when I published with Suhrkamp, I immediately was seen as a communist. *The Greek Discovery of Politics* may be my most translated book, but historians have never responded to it. I don't mind much because you always feel somewhat isolated in my profession. When you're a historian of antiquity and publish articles at the same time, there is always a certain inhibition for people who want to engage with you because they usually don't know much about it and are pretty removed from ancient history. That spares you a lot of things, on the one hand, but it also closes you off a little from the discourse. You write an article, and someone says, you're wrong, using counterarguments – that's the type of confrontation I would welcome. So, there is isolation; but I can't say there are enemies.

Strauß: Were there moments when you think you should have resisted but didn't?

Meier: It's hard to phrase it in terms of resistance. Sometimes I feel I should have tackled things earlier and with more determination. Protests or joining groups. The latter was difficult due to my isolation mentioned above. I was always steeped in my work, always pretty isolated, and I think there are times I should have done more. Recently all the stories in Berlin about the Historian Jörg Baberowski (who was attacked by militant left student organizations for his opinions on migration) came out and there is said that a certain minority of students is trying to muzzle him because of his so called “rightwing views”. This would be a situation where I feel if I were still member of a university I had to resist. The longer I think about it, the more instances come to mind, in which I should have said, “Enough!”

Strauß: What does the word “religion” evoke in you?

Meier: Nothing, because of the way I was raised. I'd think of the Christian religion in the context of this question. But when I think of all the horrific things that are being

perpetrated chiefly in the name of Islam these days, it doesn't make me feel very good.

Strauß: Would you describe yourself as a person of faith?

Meier: Yes, but only in a very basic sense.

Strauß: Returning to the topic of Europe, was there a moment in which you felt pride or shame on behalf of Europe?

Meier: Terms like "pride" have little value to me. I can subscribe to the notion of feeling like a European, in the way I explained my view of European history above. But I wouldn't want to use the term "pride," rather something like awareness of the fact that the idea of Europe is a big deal. I am thinking about publishing my planned book on the history of Europe with this dedication: "To the old Europe."

Strauß: Lastly, we would like to query you in the role of prognosticator. If you look ahead 50 years into the future, how do you imagine Germany?

Meier: If I knew that, I'd be happy to tell you. I'd assume that English will be spoken in Germany and that the important decisions will be made in the United States or France. I don't have especially high expectations when it comes to Germany. But maybe I'll be surprised.

Strauß: And do you have faith in European unity, or do you see it all rather skeptically?

Meier: A complete rupture is hard for me to imagine. But the question of whether this entity will truly grow closer together, I have no straight answer to. I do have a fear that haunts me, which is that, in the future, we'll have to expect millions of immigrants, and what that will mean I don't dare imagine. You don't have to look to Poland, Hungary, or the Czech Republic. Europe is going to have to face a challenge due to migration that does not come with tried and true solutions. If even the Americans are overwhelmed by immigration, the typical nation of immigrants, what can we expect? What is going on right now is only a mild version of what's to come.

Strauß: Do you see it as an unprecedented event in history?

Meier: I think so. Advances in the medical sciences alone have predicated big population increases, which in and of itself is a sign of civilizational progress. But we shouldn't forget that it is burdened with significant side-effects. We are woefully unprepared for the consequences.

Strauß: But we weren't prepared for unification and the entire post-war world, either.

Meier: That may be true but in terms of the post-war era, we had benevolent occupying forces with the Americans and the British, less with the French. Of course, there was

hunger and unemployment but, in all, we had it undeservedly good back then. After unification, much did not go as planned but when you look at the steps that the Americans and Gorbachev took, one has to acknowledge a serendipitous chain of a multitude of events. Such developments would have been impossible with Putin and Trump. So, a lot of luck was involved, while today, the processes unfold relatively independently from individual people. I would also guess that we still can't fully predict how new media will continue to shape our future. Imagine sitting at the bar with teachers and locksmiths and saying, "Merkel has got to go." One says it, another one says it, and maybe you have another beer. Through the internet, everything is completely anonymous, anybody can air their grievances without having to look their counterpart in the eye. It is near impossible to track that. How will this evolve and how do you grow into a society like that? There is so much today that you simply can't get a handle on anymore.

Strauß: If we synthesize both theories, the conclusion is that migration is the biggest danger or, at least, the biggest challenge for Europe, as is new social media. You could add that migration from Muslim-majority regions, evidently largely very traditional in character, could form a conservative antipode to postmodern societies.

Meier: Could be. But then we'd all have to go to the mosque afterwards.

Strauß: Yes, maybe. Or there will be opportunities where ideas like responsibility and participation are concerned.

Meier: When you see those, who are still more Turkish than German, I'm skeptical about how and when this integration is supposed to work. Because the Christian faith, which I adhere to as well, has become very tolerant over time, and the question poses itself whether we have tolerance on the other side.

Meier: That remains the question. Can Islam be Europeanized? Do you have a vision for a European Islam?

Meier: What I see right now is that these things are being fought out. One side is for it, the other against. Those in opposition are still the majority. If you look to France, and the banlieues in Paris for example, much as been tried without success. On top of that, we don't know if transitions in the economy will work out because there, too, differences between Germany and other countries exist. We are a country without many natural resources and have to produce a lot, and in the area of education and job training, we are not exactly succeeding with the next generation, either. When citizens of the GDR took to the streets, one of their chants was, "Stasi into production!" When you walk the streets today, you hear people scream, "Pedagogues into schools!" The professors I've met in my life wouldn't make it an hour in front of a school class. I would remind everybody of the rule of holistic learning: Every word has to be learned.

Strauß: A last question: What would your plea, advice, or note be for the coming generations?

Meier: Acquire an overview of the world so you always know what is going on. Sabotage bureaucracy, and, more than anything, retain a sense of humour! Specialise but generalise as well. You have to have something that you perfect but you should also be a generalist, so you don't get lost in your discipline.

Strauß: Very good. Christian Meier, I thank you very much for the in-depth conversation!