

Episode 9, season 2 (July 2021)

Spotlight on Germany and Namibia

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Sangeetha: Welcome to the Justice Visions podcast. My name is Sangeetha Yogendran and I'm one of the researchers on the Justice Visions research project. Our regular listeners may find my voice a bit familiar from our previous episodes on Cambodia and Sri Lanka that I co-hosted earlier this year. And from the introduction to our podcast. I have two guests today that I have the pleasure of introducing: Professor Reinhart Kößler and Mrs. Ida Hoffmann to talk today about Germany's recent official recognition of the genocide against the Herero and the Nama people of 1904 to 1908 in the country we know today as Namibia, which was under German colonial rule then. Welcome professor Kößler. You are a German sociologist with long research experience concerning Namibia and particularly Namibian German memory politics.

Welcome also to Mrs. Hoffman. You are a long time defender of the recognition of the genocide and an advocate for reparations. Thank you both for joining us today. Before we dive right into the questions, we want to contextualize Germany's recognition of the genocide in Namibia. So maybe firstly, I can ask you Mrs. Hoffman, could you give us some context on this genocide that Germany carried out in its former colony?

Mrs. Hoffmann: Thank you, thank you very, very much. But allow me also so that I can start go deep down into the ground, the very cumbersome issues of the German genocide against our Nama people and the Herero people of Namibia. The Nama, who choose not to surrender and let themselves be seen in the German territory, will be shot until all are exterminated. And it is very, very much important that the world must know about it.

And then about, it is the notorious German extermination order given by the really infamous and brutal general Lothar von Trotha on the 22nd, April, 1905 against the Nama, second October, 1904 against the Herero's. I am honored to be part of this fight for justice because I stand for justice. To know that even what I'm always saying to myself, it is not that I read in a newspaper or heard what people have said, but I have, it comes to be myself, especially when I was opening my kindergarten, that I must be honest with myself.

So that is my honor, as we gather together for the solution to the question of that notorious brutal attempt at exterminating an entire race of people. That is one of the things that people think when we talk about the extermination order and the killing, how people fled. Therefore it is that we are standing also for the Nama's and the Herero's. We are standing for justice. Justice in the brutal face of the German genocide. Justice for the survivors of this cruelty.

Justice for the descendants left in a huge vacuum. Characterized by landlessness, poverty, hunger, and other upheavals, you know, it is such painful.

Sangeetha: Thank you so much, Mrs. Hoffmann, you provided us with such really important context and also where you're coming from on this journey of justice. I think as an external observer, the recognition seems to be long overdue and at the same time, the fact that it happens now, maybe it's not a total surprise with other countries like Belgium, France, the UK, and the US also increasingly acknowledging their violent colonial past and with negotiations in the German case being underway for many years already, but still, mister Kößler, if I can ask you, where did this decision come from and what has created the momentum now? How come despite the UN's recognition of the genocide, which dates all the way back to 1985, Germany has only now started to use this language of genocide?

Mr. Kößler: Well, I think the German official language really skirted around that word genocide for very long time when it came to Namibia and the German past as a colonial power in general. They even went to great length to avoid talking about genocide. One example is one of the very few places of memory in Berlin, which refers to the former colonies of Germany, is so-called 'Namibia stone', way out in a cemetery, which even Berliners will not know offhand. And there a stone was laid to commemorate the genocide, and the district mayor who is responsible for the area even made sure the word genocide would not be put on this stone plate. It was only a general reference to the war or so. So, they were really hunting down the word genocide for a long time.

Sangeetha: And if I may come in here to ask, when did this change? When was this language of genocide adopted in the end?

Mr. Kößler: Only in 2015, the German Foreign Office came round to letting know that they would now exceed to the language of genocide. And it was in a very informal way actually, when it happened, Ida (Hoffmann) wrote and email to me and asked me, can you please provide the press statement of the foreign office? And I was a little bit unsure, found out: oh, there is no press statement. It was not even a press statement. It's just during a press conference that in a very informal way so that they let slip this information. But it helped to clear the way for the negotiations between the two governments. And these negotiations have been going on for, well, five and a half years now, very long time. And it seems there has been a certain rush in the end.

As far as we can tell, it was after all not in the public view. What happened, what we can tell is there was a certain amount of stalemate. On the one hand, I think in Namibia, everybody was sure Germany must acknowledge the genocide, ask for an apology and provide reparations, and recognize the obligation for reparations. And the German side really tried to avoid by all means the term 'reparations'. And on the other hand, we had the problem that most of the

victim communities in Namibia felt they are not properly represented in the negotiations. So these were the two central problems. And then again, also of course the Germans acknowledged they would have to make some material redress. It is very, very vague terminology and just trying not to use the term 'reparations'. And I think that is also one of the problems we are facing now. And I think that also tells you a bit about the low priority German diplomacy actually gave to this whole process. They're not, they have not engaged with the seriousness that is actually necessary to find an equitable solution and to work seriously towards reconciliation.

Sangeetha: And Mrs. Hoffman, for you as a longtime advocate of the recognition of this genocide, can you tell us why this recognition is so important? How have you received it? And also how has the Namibian government reacted to this?

Mrs. Hoffmann: What I would like to inform you about is that genocide was a discussion in our family house. As my great grandfather was always telling us how things was happening. Let me emphasize, those Nama people, who succumbed to the brutality of this extermination order, the survivors and their descendants, we, who are still alive today are the victims of this inhumane cruelty. That painful chapter of our histories needs to be closed. But if it has to be closed, then it means that honesty must be there. It has not only when they have signed the treaty, it has been finished. No, not at all. It has still continued. And then the destructions which drove the Nama and the Herero to this extinction which took place during those four brutal years of extermination order 1904-1908, is evil and immoral. To know that before I come in by the two governments, Namibian government, and German government, to know that what they have done to us, they have killed, they killed our people.

There's no respect in these two people, the German government and the Namibia government, what was happening with the people of Namibia, especially the Nama and the Herero's. That is a painful thing.

Sangeetha: And what do you think should happen now, Mrs. Hoffmann?

Mrs. Hoffmann: And we want a place where we can sit together with the German government and we can talk. And then, there the discussions will take place. And the Namibian Government will only be the mediator. If we talk about justice, and we talk about justice. And we talk about leaders, fathers of the countries, who must show us, you know, teach us justice, with how they behave and how they're doing things. This is not justice because all of the sudden, it's the two governments who are talking now today. The majority of the Nama speaking people are not there, the traditional leaders. The Herero traditional leaders are not there. With whom they are talking? There is no way where our government can just together with the German government come in and decide on how much will be paid. Apology will be brought, and it is full stop, finished. No, our cry is that, yes, acknowledgement, the round table with that acknowledgement. That is what we want.

So when you see the graveyards of the Germans, oh, such beautiful flowers and tomb stones. My god, go to where our peoples were buried. I was at Ugamas some time, some years ago, maybe two, three years ago. And here, all of the sudden the German government just decided to come and apologize. To whom were they apologizing? No, that's not fair. We want also reparation. That means, after everything, we have our discussions, we come to a peaceful conclusion that the skulls, the remains, the artifacts that are there have to come back. It must come back. That we can put some of these things in a museum. And the rest, where we could bury them and can say to them: let your soul rest in peace. This unjust treatment, it's painful. Our campaign, our talks is for justice. And Germany must answer to the call of justice. Reparations. It's not the money, who will heal the wounds of us. Money will not heal the wounds. But respect and honest discussions and justice, at least, will bring some hope, that we can reconcile.

Sangeetha: Yes. Thank you so much, Mrs. Hoffmann. I think you not only answered the question, but you covered so many more important things. So maybe Mr. Köbler, I can ask you just as Mrs. Hoffman was talking about, there's been a lot of critique, partly related to the non-involvement or the non-consultation with descendants of victims, partly because this is still not a formal or an unqualified apology. It's also not linked to a reparations policy that is seen as sufficient. Instead, some have argued that maybe this is really a case of the sinner setting the terms of their own atonement even as a means to control the narrative perhaps, since it's the former colonial power that decides on the wording of apologies and the scope of reparations. So what do you think this has meant Mr. Köbler in terms of the potential impact of this recognition?

Mr. Köbler : Well, I think one is always to see on the one side the situation in the Namibia and on the other side the situation in Germany and internationally. Unfortunately, Namibia does not get so much recognition internationally, or even in Germany, as we would always wish it would have. And that also of course, makes it easier for government policies, which I find not very salubrious to sort of slip through the public scrutiny, if you like. But obviously the idea that you make the apology one of the main issues of the negotiations, was really very very problematic. I asked even people from the foreign office, why could not the parliament, the Bundestag, take a very brief resolution saying this has happened, the genocide, and in the sense of a deep apology we are extremely sorry and of course there's responsibility of the German state. And we want it never to happen again, we want to do anything we can to amend what has happened and then let us talk. And of course, then the format of the talks, as Ida has already explained, would be very, very important. So this has not happened at all, but the whole issue was dragged through the negotiations and now it's sort of a very studied formula to avoid legal commitment. So they say it's a moral, historical and political responsibility for Germany but they don't want to create legal obligations and they don't want to create precedence for other issues, not only other issues about colonialism, but also issues coming out of the second world war, like not quite resolved issues with Greece and Italy where SS terrorists have

done terrible things in many villages, just burning people in churches and raising the places to the ground. Or in Poland, where we all know, was one of the main arenas of the Holocaust, but of course also very, very severe repression against Polish people.

All of this is not quite over. So I think this is one reason why German diplomacy is acting like it does. And of course, as a citizen, I feel it's not acceptable. You know, you have on the one hand you sort of star yourself as world champion of memory. And on the other side, you are really not forthcoming in seriously dealing with the issues. And well if I think of German civil society, I think one can say there are small very active groups, post-colonial initiatives in various places trying to do their best. It's very, very difficult. And if I may add, we have from our side, as critical academics, we've been dealing with issue for a very long time. Also said continuously, for the last years while these negotiations were going on: if you reach an agreement between the two governments that does not enjoy legitimacy with the people concerned, you have not achieved anything because it will not be reconciliation. It will not contribute towards peace. But it will in the best of cases continue or even exacerbate the conflicts that have been going on.

It's also part of the German responsibility. And if they say now, as our foreign minister has said, this is all up to the Namibian government, they are just sort of washing their hands in innocence, but that's not seriously on, and it's certainly not what is required I think, as we are talking about in that framework, what is required in terms of transitional justice.

Sangeetha: If I can just pick up from there, is there anything from this German experience that could serve as a best practice, as we talked about earlier, several former colonial powers are taking similar initiatives these days. So is there any lessons that can be learned from this experience despite some of the problematic areas?

Mr. Kößler : I'm afraid, I'm more, more on the negative side. I think it so happens that our former foreign minister, the late Hans-Dietrich Genscher, who was instrumental in engineering the UN peace plan for Namibia in 1989 which led to independence, has written one of his last publications just before he passed, ~~on~~ on Namibian foreign policy, and reflecting on his experience. And he said you have to engage with people. You have to know your counterparts and you have to be aware of their needs and of their expectations. And that is exactly what German diplomacy has failed to do in this case. One could now name instances where it has just been clear that the negotiators were not aware of the mindsets of their counterparts. And it is, it is a very, very serious shortcoming for negotiations on the issue of justice, of genocide not to render an apology upfront.

Sangeetha: Thank you for that, Mr. Kößler. And I think we could ask many, many more questions, but I'm going to now go to our last question and maybe I'll direct it to you, Mrs. Hoffman. We always like to ask our interviewees where they are looking for inspiration, and maybe I can ask you what gives you

hope in this area and what can we do moving forward from here?

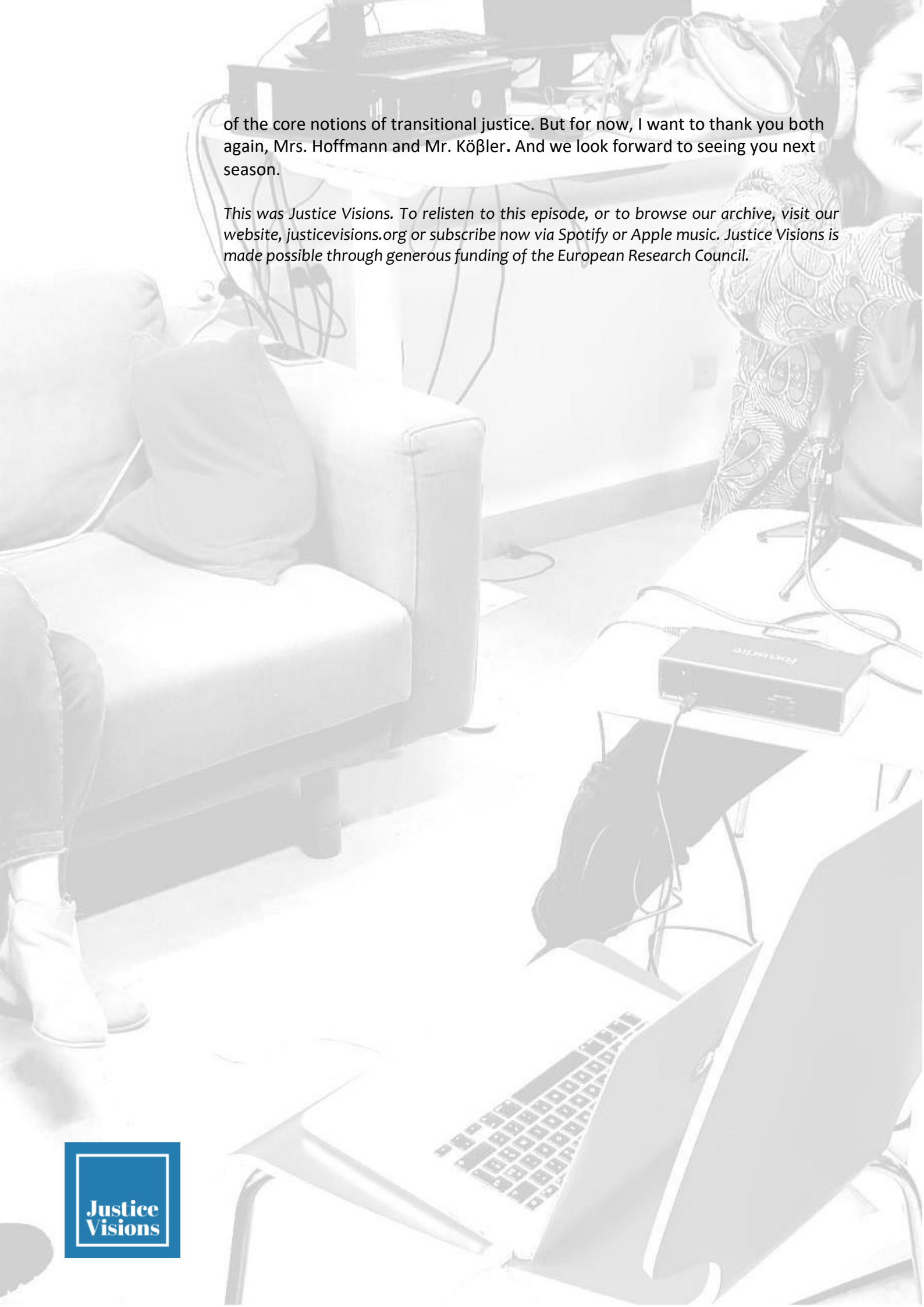
Mrs. Hoffmann: It must be very clear that the Nama and the Herero are not in confrontation or at war with the German government, neither the German people. But we demand justice for the wounds of the past to be healed. We, as the descendants of the survivors of the German genocide demand as to the facts of the genocide itself. The urgent dialogue with the German government.

First I say urgent talks, a round-table, must be put in a motion without delay. Even if we, the technical committee, the community and also put in writing for the German government, that is what we want. It is urgent talks, a roundtable. And our demands on the round table dialogue must be very clear, and include, amongst others, a former official acknowledgement of the atrocities, that they have done against we the Nama's, and the Herero's. This needs to be followed by an official apology from the German government. The process of repatriation of all human remains of Namibia petition German custody must be duly and fully completed. Reparation for damages must be done.

Sangeetha: Do you have any final reflections on what needs to happen next in this process?

Mr. Köbler: Yes, I think for me, there is a little bit of hope when I think about the trajectory German memory dealing with dire past has come. There was much resistance about acknowledging even the Holocaust in the fifties and even in the sixties, it took a courageous people to single handedly change that to some extent. And so there were various stages of acknowledging big groups also not beside the Jews like Sinti, the Roma, the gay people and forced laborers and so forth. So my faint hope is that on that trajectory we will reach a point where there is also an equitable and dignified way of acknowledging the responsibility coming from the colonial past. But I think it will be long haul still. And I think we will have to continue. And to add, I think you are quite right, there is also a certain movement in various other countries of Europe, including at the moment importantly Belgium mentioned that terms of finding new ways of confronting this colonial past of really getting serious about returning stolen objects of art. And most of the colonial early acquired art has been stolen. There's no doubt about that. And I think in bits and pieces, we are getting there. But these bits and pieces, and this long process is set against the urgency, which you feel from Ida's words and from the situation in Namibia. I think that we should also always keep in mind: on the one side a very long and drawn out process, and on the other side, a real serious urgency.

Mr. Köbler: Thank you for that, Mr. Köbler. As we are approaching the end of our podcast season, I want to thank you both Mrs. Hoffmann and Mr. Köbler for sharing your insights, your pain, and your quest for justice, and to make a difference. And also, I want to thank our listeners for tuning in. As always for our audience, feel free to reach out to us with suggestions, for topics you'd like to hear in our next season, we'll be doing something slightly different, and we will really enter into a dialogue between theorists and practitioners regarding some



of the core notions of transitional justice. But for now, I want to thank you both again, Mrs. Hoffmann and Mr. Köbler. And we look forward to seeing you next season.

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